

NOVEMBER

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10-STORY ALL DIFFERENT! DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



10¢

**THE
CURSE
OF THE
BLEEDING
STONE**

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

**MEMO FROM
THE MURDERED**

By W. D. ROUGH



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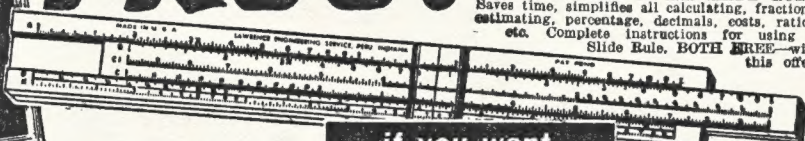
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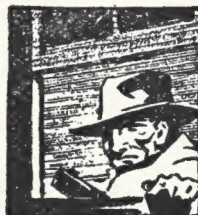
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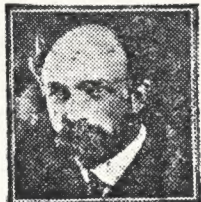
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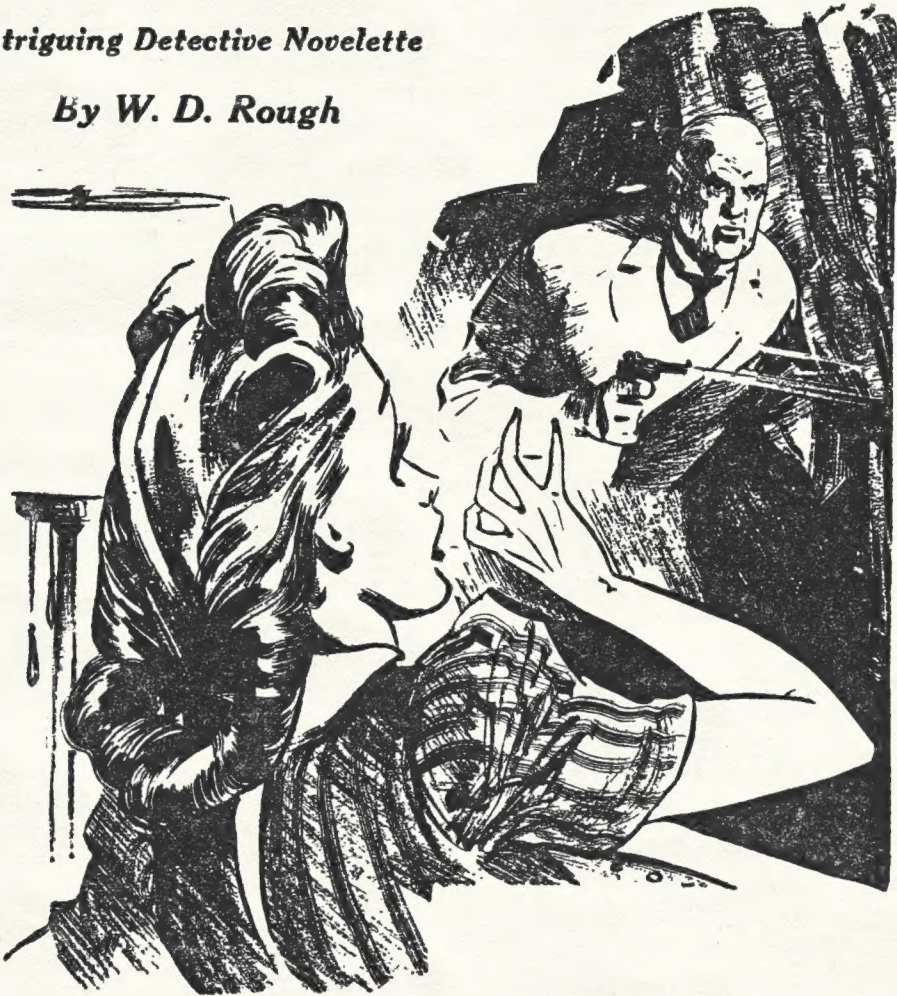
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Memo from

Intriguing Detective Novelette

By W. D. Rough



CHAPTER I

ASHLEY BLY was balanced on his neck in the front seat of a taxicab at La Guardia Field when the pert trick in the floppy-brimmed straw hat, followed by a gum-chewing, rabbity little man, tapped high heels imperiously toward the cab.

Obviously the girl was heading for

this particular cab; and obviously Ashes couldn't get out without her seeing. He did the next best thing—nothing.

The girl was dressed in a smartly tailored suit, summer-weight, pale green, which matched her eyes. She carried one piece of hand-tooled luggage, also a matching shade of green. Neat.

the Murdered



Ashes Bly, famous F. B. I. man, traveled a tough trail to find out who was sowing seeds of propaganda in the city's leading newspaper. But even that intrepid sleuth ran into a suicide snag when he grappled with Fifth Column criminals—led by Satan's saboteur.

She opened the cab door, said, "The News Building, driver," and climbed in, skirts swirling.

Ashes Bly thanked the gods, shifted gears, and swung the cab around. The rabbit little man behind the girl stood riveted in amazement for a second and then cursed foully and dashed after the cab.

Ashes chuckled. There would be a time of reckoning with the little man.

As for the girl in the cab's tonneau, she was behaving as one would expect the possessor of such brilliantly red hair to behave. She was smoking nervously, tapping on the seat, plucking at her skirt. Ashes decided she was confronting a situation with which she hadn't the faintest idea of how to cope.

"Shall I wait, miss?" he asked when he jockeyed into the curb before the towering edifice that housed Macollum Publications.

"No," snapped the girl. "Here." She pushed a bill at Ashes.

Ashes' white teeth flashed. "Darned if I didn't forget to throw on the meter, miss," he said.

ALTHOUGH the girl was nettled she didn't have time, since she was already scrambling out onto the sidewalk, to show it.

"Make a guess," she said peremptorily.

"Forget it," Ashes said. "I wasn't going to charge you, anyhow."

"You—what?"

"On the house," Ashes said expansively. "First passenger from the airport every day."

"Don't be absurd!" exclaimed the girl. She handed Ashes a twenty-dollar bill. "Take five. That ought to cover it."

"No doubt," Ashes agreed. "But I haven't any change. Forget it."

Under other circumstances, such an approach couldn't have missed. But this girl had no time for shenanigans.

"Come with me," she said curtly. "I'll get change."

Ashes was out and had the girl's bag in a trice. He'd been hoping for

just this. He fell in behind her, grinning. The blistering sun made his streaked white hair contrast more vividly than ever with the mahogany-brown of his face. His nickname was apt. His hair was for all the world like a pile of ashes.

They went through the plate-glass doors of the News Building, passed an eyeful of blonde at a reception desk. Then they swung left through a gleaming corridor that wound around to an office labeled simply: *SECRETARY*.

The girl didn't lose any momentum as she went through the doorway. She stopped, swiveled, looked at the alleged secretary and demanded:

"Where's Uncle Mike?"

Ashes looked at the secretary, too. He wanted to continue to look. She was a tall, rawboned woman, actually; but the poise of her supple body, the calmness of her blue eyes, and the huge coils of meticulously arranged raven hair at the nape of her neck gave her something which no girl in Ashes' experience ever had had.

She was fire and ice. She had the strength of a man in her full-blown, graceful body—and the promise of everything tenderly feminine. Her name was Katie Boyle, and she was M.M. Macollum's private secretary.

She said levelly at the girl, "I don't know where M.M. is. I imagine he's gone off on one of his want-to-be-alone spells."

"Tony doesn't think so," said M.M. Macollum's niece.

Katie Boyle shrugged. "His copy is delivered regularly. M.M. has gone off like this before."

"Tony never got worried before," said the girl. She whirled and marched out of the office.

"You don't believe a word you said," Ashes murmured to Katie Boyle.

Katie Boyle's poise almost cracked. "Who are you?" she demanded, eyeing Ashes up and down.

"Taxi driver," Ashes said easily, holding up the green traveling bag. "Better collect a better story, honey."

Uncle Mike's little girl is mad enough to call in the law."

Ashes kept his head turned long enough as he went out the door to see Katie Boyle's pink tongue wet her lips. He caught up with Marin Moerly as she was entering the elevator, and followed her dutifully as she hurried out again on the fourth floor and barged into the city room, legs flashing.

IT WAS impossible that the din of I chattering typewriters, bawls of "Copy!" and whirrings of telephone bells ceased momentarily; but it seemed that way. Certainly plenty of eyes riveted on the girl as she strode to a door marked:

MANAGING EDITOR

Henry Esterly

"Essy," cried Marin Moerly, planting herself in front of a bald, bright-eyed man's desk, "where is Uncle Mike?"

Henry Esterly barked into a telephone, saw the girl, winced and removed his eyes from her. "Yeh, yeh," he said and slammed down the phone and seized another. "Who are you and waddaya want?" he grunted. "No, he isn't. And I don't know when he will be. Call back tomorrow." The phone banged. "Hear that?" Esterly demanded of the girl. "That's where I stand. Your uncle hasn't been around since we had that shindig at the Sport Club, two weeks ago."

"Essy!" Fear riddled the girl's voice. "Essy!"

"Take it easy, Marin," Esterly said nervously. "Who's this?" He pointed at Ashes.

Marin remembered. "A taxi driver. Pay him for me, please. . . . But, Essy, you must have *some* idea. Katie said Uncle Mike's copy is delivered regularly."

Esterly started to draw out a wallet, then his attention was taken by the girl. Ashes was satisfied. Once paid, he'd be expected to leave.

"Sure, Mike's copy is delivered," Esterly snapped, drumming on the

desk with blunt, capable fingers. He was a middle-aged man, paunchy, a dynamo of energy. His words were jerky, his voice staccato. "A messenger delivers it. Who, I don't know. A guy, is all that kid at the reception desk says."

"But, Essy—"

"Damn it, what am I supposed to do? Don't you think I'm just as much out on a limb as anyone? I've gotta run this rag while he's away. Make decisions I don't want to make. I tell you, Marin—"

"I don't want to hear it!"

"You *must* hear it," Esterly raged. "You've got to take some of this responsibility off me. You were closer to Mike Macollum than anyone. You know about his policies—"

"I won't listen!" Twin spots of color stained the girl's cheeks. "I'm going home."

She spun on her heel and reversed the procedure of entering. This time, however, one bald, bright-eyed managing editor followed her like a puppy dog pleading for a bone.

Ashes fell in behind them, and he interpreted the glances of the city room correctly this time. Everyone was amused. What reporter *wouldn't* be amused at seeing his hard-bitten boss being bitten in turn?

On the ground floor again, Ashes lounged against the reception counter while Esterly and Marin Moerly fought.

"Gee, you're cute," he said to the blonde receptionist.

"I've got a friend, hacker," said the girl tartly.

"A dozen of them, I'll bet," Ashes said admiringly. The girl studied him. He kept his chiseled face sober. He won.

"I thought you were just being fresh," the girl said.

"Not me, Mary," Ashes said. "I think you're swell."

"My name isn't Mary," she said. "It's Helen."

ASHES winked at her and slipped down the hall, opened the door to Katie Boyle's office. Her blue eyes narrowed.

"I guess you've figured out I'm not a cabby," Ashes said.

"You're in some kind of business that's dangerous," Katie Boyle said. "It's in your eyes."

Ashes grinned. "I've never met anyone as dangerous as you, honey. I want to talk to you alone tonight. Set the time and place."

"You're big," Katie Boyle said, "but two circulation hustlers could take you. Get out!"

"Think again, honey," Ashes drawled. "The name is Bly—Ashley Bly."

Katie Boyle studied that a minute. Her blue eyes widened. "You're—"

"Don't say it," Ashes grinned. "Where do I meet you?"

"Now I know you," Katie Boyle frowned. "I've seen your pictures often. I guess you've got me—I mean, I'd sooner talk to you peaceably than—"

"Unh-huh," Ashes said.

"I'll break my date with Rosie and see you about eight. I live at the Key Apartments, right across the street from M.M. and his niece. They live at Braxton Chambers."

"Who's Rosie?" Ashes asked.

"Roser Slainte," Katie Boyle said. "He's a dirt columnist. He used to be with the *News*; now he's with the *Clarion*. He's filthy. And that heathen Jap valet of his, Jakie, is much worse. I don't know why he hasn't been sent to a concentration camp, the little monkey."

"He'll get his," Ashes said. "Bye now. . . ."

Ashes had timed his stop-over just right. Marin Moerly was taking her first step toward the doors as he rounded the corridor again. Esterly was following her, not quite the puppy dog now, however. More like a bulldog.

Ashes slid around them and into the cab. A few blocks later, he helped them out in front of Braxton Cham-

bers, still carrying the green traveling bag as a badge.

The trio pushed through to an elevator and mounted, tension increasing, to the fourth floor. Marin Moerly led the way over a thickly carpeted corridor to the door of Suite 4-A. After inserting a key and turning the lock, she banged the door inward vigorously. She didn't stop in the living room. She was bound for a bedroom, so the only thing Ashes could do was stop her forcibly.

"Better not, Miss Moerly," he said, catching her.

"Get out of my way!"

"Stay here!" Ashes snapped. "Hold her," he ordered Esterly.

"What is this?" Esterly demanded. "Who are you? Do you realize—"

Ashes voice crackled. "I realize a damned sight more than either of you! Use your nose!"

Esterly had been growling and scowling. Now, suddenly, he gave a hollow grunt. His nostrils expanded. His mouth fell open. His gray eyes goggled, and sweat appeared on his forehead.

"Good Lord!" he said hoarsely as he got the odor. "S-stay here, Marin."

And very suddenly Marin Moerly fainted. She, too, had smelled it.

CHAPTER II

ASHES watched Esterly catch the girl, then dived through the apartment. He'd never been here before, but his nose told him where to go. The weather had been stifling for two weeks. M.M. Macollum had been missing for two weeks. A body gets messy in that time, under those conditions.

Ashes flung open the windows in the bedroom before he looked in the closet. From below a newsboy's raucous cry arose.

"Wuxtry! Wuxtry!"

Ashes tightened his lips, wrenched open the closet door, looked once and slammed it hard.

"Wuxtry! Wuxtry! Read all about it!"

Esterly's gray face appeared in the doorway. His bald spot was moist and glistening. He drove himself to the closet and looked. It didn't look as if he'd stay on his feet afterwards. Spit-tle bubbled from his lips.

"It's him," he croaked. "It's M.M."

Ashes stared fascinatedly at the figure of the man, lying face down, in the closet. The figure was pushed back, almost out of sight. Ashes felt his stomach turn over.

"Shut that door!" he roared.

Esterly shoved mightily. "Strangled," he said. "Strangled with his own necktie."

"Wuxtry! Wuxtry! Read all about the murder!"

Both Esterly and Ashes were carved in stone. They couldn't move. The newsboy's wail, rising from the street to the stench of the room, paralyzed them. The newsboy was crying things that he didn't know. That he *couldn't* know!

"Wuxtry! Publisher strangled. M.M. Macollum found in closet of his bedroom! Wuxtry! Read all about it!"

Esterly was drooling. His lax lips worked painfully. "Why, we've just found the body!" he babbled. "We've just—found the body. *And the story's on the street!*"

EMINENT NEWSPAPER PUBLISHER
STRANGLED

M.M. MACOLLUM MURDERED
BODY IN CLOSET

By
ROSER SLAINTE

Tuesday, July 20—Mysteriously missing since Tuesday night, July 7, M.M. Macollum, volatile little publisher of one of the nation's major news services, was discovered about noon in the closet of his bedroom in luxurious Braxton Chambers — dead—strangled with his own necktie. His niece, Miss Marin Moerly, made the discovery.

"This Slainte," Ashes said to Esterly, "got in on a hot one."

Esterly's plump nervous body jerked. "Incredible—that he knew and we didn't. Filthy blackmailer. Mike

fired Rosie about two months ago. Rosie went over to the *Clarion*.

"Get back to your office," Ashes said.

"You're no taxi driver," Esterly said suddenly. "Cops don't let taxi-drivers have the run of a homicide."

Ashes chuckled. "A newspaperman should be able to spot me."

Esterly studied the pile of whitish-gray hair floating six feet above Ashes heels. His eyes ran over the big, controlled frame, glanced at the brown, clender fingers.

"You're a cop," Esterly guessed. And when Ashes winked, he added, "Not a city cop, though. Your picture's been in the papers."

"Get back to your office," Ashes said. "You're boss man now."

"The hell I am," Esterly snapped. "That paper's hot. Let Marin Moerly run it. She inherits."

"You're not going to jam that little redhead at a time like this, are you?" Ashes said.

"To hell with her. Okay, I'm a sucker, though." Esterly bobbed toward the door. "Listen, you, whoever you are, we rate first crack at any dirt on this job. It's our publisher killed. How'd it look if that lousy *Clarion* scoops us again?"

THE assistant medical examiner said, "Slugged in the jaw, bumped on the back of the head and strangled while unconscious. Dead too damned long for this weather. Two weeks ago could be right."

"Thanks, doc," said Lieutenant Hartzell of homicide. He glared at Ashes. "You know more than me, I'll bet."

Ashes shook his head. "This is my party only indirectly."

"Who you working for?" Hartzell asked. "Knudsen? Stimson? Mellet? Donovan?"

Ashes shrugged. "I don't know myself. I still get my orders through the regular channels." Ashes started out.

"Hey," roared Hartzell, nettled. "Where's that Moerly dame? You and

Esterly had her here. What'd you do with her?"

Ashes said soberly, "Kidnaped."

Hartzell spat. "Cripes, you guys are Gestapo. If I don't see that girl by six tonight—"

Ashes ducked out. He expected a tail and he wouldn't have blamed Lieutenant Hartzell for doing what he could. But either Hartzell was resigned or he figured no tail could hang onto Ashes Bly for long.

Ashes went over to the Carlton Hotel and found the number of the room Cobina Jones had registered in. He went up and said softly outside the door:

"It's me, Tony. Open up."

A young, tweed-clad man opened the door, glared.

"She calmed down?" Ashes asked.

"Damned little," said Tony Ross. "Don't ride her."

"I won't—not a redhead," Ashes said, and went into the bedroom and said, "Hi, Cobina," to Marin Moerly.

She didn't answer. She was a mess, eyes red-rimmed, make-up streaked.

"You've got to talk sooner or later," Ashes said. "We may as well rehearse. You, Tony, start the ball. You're an old friend of mine, but you're also a reporter. If you hold out on me, I'll gently fry you in printer's ink." The quiet raillery of Ashes' words made them more impressive than slashes of a rubber hose. He said quickly to Marin, "You trust Tony?"

"Why—" Her green eyes got doubtful. "Tony, did you see Uncle Mike that Tuesday night—"

"Marin! You don't believe—"

"Did you see him?" Ashes cut in.

"Yes," snapped Tony Ross. "I saw him in his private office about eleven-thirty. I—never mind!"

"In your hat, Tony," Ashes drawled.

Tony Ross was a thin-faced rather handsome lad with a clean jaw and brown eyes and close-cropped yellow hair. Now, he hardened.

"So this is where we stop being friends, Ashes," he said tightly.

"Tony!" Marin sat up.

Tony Ross said sullenly, "I guess I'm supposed to be the last one saw M.M. alive that Tuesday night. Did you see him next day, Marin?"

"No," said the girl. "I was flying West to see an old college chum. I left early Wednesday morning, so I didn't go into Uncle Mike's room." She shuddered.

"M.M. was in some kind of lather," Tony Ross said. "He—well, he was in a lather. It wasn't the first time he'd holed up somewhere and sent his copy in by messenger, but on account of—" Tony faltered. He was perspiring. He was trying to tell a connected story to explain his suspicions, but he was reluctant to give the facts that would bolster up the connections.

"Honest, Ashes," he said finally, "I can't tell you any more. I've helped you so far. Hell, didn't I tell you Marin was arriving at La Guardia and that the best way you could get to M.M. was by following her?"

"I'm going to ramble," Ashes said. "If I don't get in touch with you by six o'clock, take Marin to Lieutenant Hartzell. I'm only giving her a breathing spell."

"Thanks, Ashes."

"Oh, no," Ashes said. "That about frying you still goes. I'm just giving you a breathing spell, too. . . ."

ASHES BLY hit the street in front of the Carleton Hotel—and a violent expletive hit him. It seemed scarcely possible that such a roaring sound could come from such a little man. But it did.

The rabbit little man who had been at the airport was a half block down the street when he spied Ashes. He opened his mouth and belloved.

"You louse!"

Ashes dived for the taxicab. Undoubtedly, the newspaper story of the murder had sent the little man to Braxton Chambers. There he'd learned in which direction Ashes had started and had plodded doggedly in pursuit.

Ashes chuckled as he gunned the cab. He cocked his fingers to his nose

as he passed the little man. In a way, he supposed, it was a dirty trick. But time was precious.

Sooner or later, though, Ashes knew he'd have to settle up with the little man. He hadn't the faintest notion of just how vital that little man would become.

Ashes was hurrying, but didn't seem to be. At the News Building, he grinned at the blonde receptionist. "Hullo, Mary."

"My name's Helen," the girl snapped, but she continued to look at Ashes' tanned face and wide grin. Her eyes were brown, and if there hadn't been so much mascara on her lashes, she would have been very appealing. Most any woman is appealing with mist in her eyes; and there was mist here.

"You've been crying, baby," Ashes murmured.

"It's nothing," the girl said.

Ashes made his face black. "If I thought some guy was hurting you—"

Helen looked up. "You're a good guy. What's your name?"

"Ashley, honey. Call me Ashes. Look, would you go out with me? Just once. It won't be cheating on the boy friend, because I won't try anything funny?"

It was the mention of the boy friend that changed her, made her scared, sore, uncertain. "Him!" she cried. And her eyes shifted uneasily to an envelope on the desk. Her soreness evaporated at the sight of it. She was plain scared.

"How about eight o'clock, Mary?" Ashes pressed.

The girl blurted, "All right." She gave him a Brooklyn address, then turned to plug in on the switchboard.

"Lug!" said a woman's voice behind Ashes. It was Katie Boyle, tall, poised, immaculate.

"Sh-h!" Ashes cautioned. "This is business. Why, you don't think I go for her?"

Katie sniffed.

"Don't be catty," Ashes said. "Go

back to your office. I'll see you in a minute."

Katie turned. Ashes snaked the envelope off the receptionist's desk, slid out the contents, scanned them. No wonder the blonde was scared. The typewritten papers in the envelope were an editorial. They were signed *M.M. Macollum*.

Ashes whistled softly and bent to catch what the blonde was blurring into the phone. "His copy just came in as usual, Mr. Esterly. He—he's dead, but his copy was just delivered. The s-same man brought it. . . . Y-yes, I *could* identify him."

GLIDING away from the desk, Ashes went back to Katie Boyle's office. He chucked her under the chin. She slapped his hand down.

"This Roser Slainte," Ashes said, frowning, "he wouldn't be the type to let himself open, would he?"

Katie Boyle said, "Newspapermen are not normal. They'd do anything for a scoop."

Ashes' frown changed to a scowl. "Show me around here."

Katie Boyle shrugged. "This is my office. In here—" she opened a door—"is M.M.'s private interview room." She crossed a small anteroom, opened another door. "This is the sanctum sanctorum," she said. "Here is where the pearly words of propaganda originated—" She hesitated. Ashes knew what she wanted. "Who are you working for?" she asked.

"Don't know, kitten," Ashes said, crossing the office to still another door. It was locked. Katie produced keys. "My shield says, *Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity*," Ashes continued. "My orders come the usual way through the New York F. B. I. office."

Ashes studied the door of a freight elevator that was directly opposite the door he'd just opened. "A loading platform is under this elevator, is my guess," Ashes said. "The alley behind this building is just an alley or two removed from the rear of Braxton Chambers."

Katie nodded. "You can step out of this office into the elevator, go down to the loading platform and into the alley. I've often gone home that way."

"Does Roser Slainte live nearby?"

"Yes. Up the street."

"Cozy," Ashes murmured. "You live across from M.M. Rosie lives just up the street. Tony Ross not much further. Esterly—does he live in the back yard, too?"

Katie nodded. "We all live close to the office."

Ashes went back to the desk, started to open drawers.

"No use," Katie advised. "The bottom one is the strong drawer. It's locked. M.M. had the only key."

"Maybe," Ashes said, "a smart guy doesn't have only one key, because if he loses it, he's locked out himself." Ashes sat in the swivel chair behind the desk. His easy shoulders and relaxed posture suggested power held in check. He figured that Katie Boyle knew more than she was telling. He started to talk, slowly, quietly.

"If you breathe a word of this, I'll choke that smooth throat of yours," he said. "This is all off the record."

"Wait." Katie Boyle held up a hand. "You'd better not trust me too far. But, Ashes—believe this, will you?"

"Say it," Ashes said. "If it's true, I'll know it."

CHAPTER III

KATIE'S words were simple. The impressive thing about them was the sincerity of her tone. "Ashes, I am an American," she said. That was all.

Ashes sighed. He really relaxed now. "I can believe you," he said. He leaned forward, put his brown hands flat on the desk. "Who do you suspect, Katie? Who is responsible for the filth that's been appearing in the Macollum news service releases? Was it M.M. himself?"

Katie Boyle's black head shook. "M.M. was an American, too, Ashes. He was being driven to print that

propaganda. Somebody had a hold on him powerful enough to make him change his whole editorial policy."

Ashes wasn't listening. He was staring at a corner of the huge, flat-topped desk.

"What is it?" Katie cried.

She bent over, watched Ashes take an envelope from his pocket, hold it so that it would catch anything that was scraped off the desk. Katie's blue eyes got bluer as she watched Ashes carefully brush three or four short grayish hairs into the envelope. Ashes carefully put the envelope in his pocket.

"When I find the murderer of M.M. Macollum," he said grimly, "I'll have the man who's been preying on America. Does that sound dramatic, kitten?"

Katie Boyle shook her head. "No, Ashes, it isn't dramatic. It's true. Who should know better than I? If someone hadn't murdered M.M., I think he'd have committed suicide. He was a man hounded by his conscience. He didn't want to publish this propaganda. He was forced to. It was killing him."

Ashes' black eyes were sombre. "I believe you, kitten," he said. "Macollum Publications control two hundred and sixty-three newspapers. There are about two thousand newspapers in the United States, and the Macollum Publications Press Release Bureau serves fourteen hundred of these papers. Every M. P. despatch is read by a hundred million American people."

Ashes' fingers made hard fists on the desk. "And every M. P. release for the past two months has originated in the office of a Nazi propaganda bureau. No one can prove it, but I *know*!"

For a long moment there was silence in the office. Every word Ashes had uttered was true. Macollum Publications was the most efficient propaganda organ in the country. Up until a few months ago, it had been American all the way through. Then—overnight, it seemed—fifteen hundred newspapers went crazy. Insidious Nazi

propaganda went out over the press wires.

Oh, is was concealed under hon-eyed words and American catch phrases, yes. But for that reason it was worse than ever. Subtly, in cleverly twisted paragraphs Macollum Publications began to tell the people the war was being lost. Germany was triumphing every day. The men in Washington were selling out. Things like that!

There was a furore in Washington, and orders clicked through to the F. B. I. Ashes' orders said simply: "M.P. news releases now pro-Nazi. Investigate."

Ashes looked at Katie Doyle. "I've got something to dig into with this murder," he said. "If I find the killer, I'll find the rat who's behind all this. Think it over, kitten. I don't want to hurt you or your friends; but once in a lifetime something comes along that's bigger than friendship. This is it. I don't care what happens to me on this. Maybe they'll get me first." Ashes shrugged and murmured softly, "That's ashes to ashes, dust to dust." He looked at Katie Boyle, shrugged again with a carelessness he didn't feel, and said, "But maybe I'll get them first, too. If I do—it'll be tough for anybody who gets in my way! So long, kitten."

WHEN Ashes had finished at the Centre Street laboratory, he called Henry Esterly and said, "Here's your five star final, chum. I checked some hairs I found on the corner of M.M.'s desk with hairs taken from his head at the morgue. They match. That means M.M. probably was killed in his office and carried out the back, through the alley to his own apartment. Don't ask why."

Ashes banged the receiver as Esterly barked, "Rewrite!" and drove to Roser Slainte's apartment.

"Mr. Slainte is still abed, but he will see you," said Jakie, the Japanese butler. Ashes nodded. Jakie was quite a character in a butler's stiff black

coat and striped trousers. He was short and squat and beaming. His English was good, with no hint of an accent.

Ashes followed the Jap into a bedroom and said, "Hello, Slainte, you little pixie."

Roser Slainte lounged in the bed. He wasn't very big, but he was very dark. His black hair was slicked to his scalp. A small black mustache perched on his upper lip. He was patronizing Ashes as he said:

"Gin and vermouth, Jakie. . . . What'll you have, Bly, before you say 'ashes to ashes' and drill me through the heart?"

Ashes ignored it, wrinkling his nose at Slainte's bed. The columnist's pajamas were deep-toned blue. The sheets on the bed were black silk. The pillow cases were green. To top it, Slainte hoisted himself and fitted a long Turkish cigarette into a green jade holder.

"Okay," Ashes said. "Whistle the patter, chum. What's your story?"

Slainte chuckled. "The best, the very best. Eyewitness."

Ashes snapped. "If you saw it, why didn't you call the cops? You're an accessory."

Slainte spiraled purple smoke over the sheets. "You can't prove a thing," he said. "I can say I learned about the body through regular news sources."

Ashes got up and started out of the room.

"Hey!" yelled Slainte. "What's up?"

"I'm going to get a warrant issued for you," Ashes said easily. "You're not dealing with local cops, dope. This is Uncle Sam."

"Sit down," Slainte said quickly. "I'll tell you what I know. I don't have anything to lose. And besides—"

"Besides what?" Ashes caught him up.

Slainte scowled. "Maybe I'm a heel and a blackmailer, but by damn you never read any pro-Nazi stuff in my column. This is one time I'm not thinking of myself."

Ashes sat down again as Jakie came in with the drinks. "Your mail, sir," said the Jap, handing Slainte a pile of letters and a package.

Slainte grimaced. "Bills," he said. "Snap it up," Ashes pressed.

"O KAY, get out your nutshell," Slainte said. "Tuesday night, two weeks ago, we all went to a shindig at the Sport Club—Esterly, Marin Moerly, Katie Boyle, Tony Ross and a bunch of newspaper guys and gals. I saw Katie Boyle slip an envelope to Tony Ross. Then Ross made a phone call. He called M.M. Macollum. Then Ross went over to M.M.'s office and gave M.M. the envelope Katie had given him."

"You're guessing," Ashes said.

"No," Slainte said. "I admit I didn't know what was happening then, but I found out later when I saw M.M. It was like this. Tony Ross came back to the Sport Club and told me M.M. wanted to see me. I'll tell you what we talked about later. The point now is that I was followed when I went to M.M.'s office, and the person who followed me listened to what M.M. told me. And when I left this person went in and killed M.M."

"Who was it?" Ashes said. "And how can you be sure?"

"Because I heard a noise in the outer office when I was with M.M.," Slainte said. "I knew somebody was out there. So when I'd finished with M.M. and went out, I sneaked back and turned the tables. This time I listened. And I heard the murder take place. And I even opened the door and saw the killer hauling M.M.'s body out the back."

"Who?" Ashes asked tightly.

"I'll tell you if you give me a break," Slainte said. "The reason I didn't call the cops right away was because I wanted to see if Macollum Publications would change their propaganda policy now that M.M. was dead. Besides, I wanted a scoop. I held off till I heard Marin Moerly was returning, then I gave the yarn to my paper. I figured the body would be cached in

the bedroom somewhere and— You know, Bly, the motive for this kill will slay you."

"Yeh?" said Ashes.

Slainte grinned. "Yeh. I'm the motive, Bly. Me, Mrs. Slainte's little boy. See, I had something juicy on a certain party. I admit I was bleeding this party. Finally, this party couldn't pay any more. But it happened that this party knew something juicy about another party, get it?"

"What a heel you are," Ashes spat. "Do you think—" Ashes broke off, looked at the package in Slainte's nicotine-stained fingers. "Hold it!" Ashes barked. "There are no stamps or postmark on that package."

Slainte's little eyes went wide. He glanced at the package in his hand, hefted it. It wasn't very big. It didn't have to be. Rosie started to tremble. He started to hold the box away from him as if it would bite. Then, incredibly, he did the dumbest thing he could have done. Terror gripped him. He hauled back his arm and threw the box at the half open window.

Ashes ducked. "Sap!" he rasped, rolling over sideways and pulling his chair down on top of him.

The box missed the window, struck the sill.

HELL broke loose. There was a deafening detonation, a roaring concussion. Glass shattered. Plaster rained down from the walls. The room reverberated.

A single scream—an animal scream—wrenched from Roser Slainte's torn lips. Ashes' head was driven hard against the floor. The explosion pushed the chair down on him hard, like a giant weight. He huddled there, arms over his grayish hair. He stayed that way until the rain of débris slackened. Then he looked up cautiously.

There was a jagged hole where the window had been. The room was a shambles.

Roser Slainte lay very still. His green jade cigaret, by a freak, stuck crazily from bleeding lips. Part of the

TSD

window frame seemed to be wrapped around his chest. The black silk sheets were rumpled over him like a shroud. He was dead.

Ashes breathed deeply, then looked at the door. Jakie stood there, black eyes moist and liquid.

"Where'd you get that package?" Ashes lashed.

"On the table with the rest of the mail, sir," Jakie replied woodenly. "But now that you mention it, sir, I don't recall receiving it from the postman. Someone must have entered the apartment and put the package with the mail."

Ashes bit his lip. Jakie was as inscrutable as a Buddha. "Who came here today?" Ashes snapped.

"Mr. Tony Ross, sir," said Jakie softly. "No one else."

Ashes' mind clicked. He got to the phone, called Centre Street. "Why did you work for Slainte?" he shot at Jakie.

Jakie shrugged impassively. "He paid well."

Ashes talked to Lieutenant Hartzell, explaining what had happened and learning from Hartzell that Marin Moerly had not been detained.

Ashes called Marin at her hotel.

"Do you have a key to your uncle's strong box?" he asked.

She hesitated, then said, "Yes. What's the idea pretending you're a taxicab driver, Mr. Bly?"

"That was a fluke," Ashes said. "I was going to tail you in that cab, but you picked it to ride in. Never mind that. Get that key and meet me in your uncle's office right away. Where's Tony?"

"I don't know."

Ashes swore softly. "He's in love with you, but you don't know where he is. We'll see!"

Ashes pronged the receiver viciously. He hadn't expected Tony Ross to lam. He barked Lieutenant Hartzell's number again and ordered Martzell to put out a *Wanted* for Tony Ross and a tail on Marin Moerly.

"Stick here. I'll be back," Ashes

snapped at Jakie and loped from the apartment. . . .

"You—louse!"

In spite of himself, Ashes had to laugh. The rabby little man had caught up with him again. It wasn't luck, for Ashes' movements had been confined to a small area. As he'd said, everyone in this case lived in everyone else's back yard. The little man was no dummy, either.

CHAPTER IV

BUT Ashes was lucky again. He got the cab under way before the little man caught him. He went to Katie Boyle's office.

"You've got fire in your eyes," Katie said.

"And it'll burn *you*, kitten, if you don't talk fast," Ashes said levelly. "Rosie just got bombed to whatever hell he was scheduled for."

Katie Boyle's magnificent blue eyes dilated. "Then it *wasn't* Rosie, after all?"

"What made you think it was?"

"Because M.M. ordered Tony Ross to investigate Rosie. I thought, naturally, that it was Rosie who had the hold on M.M."

"Rosie *did* have a hold on M.M.," Ashes said, "But he got it from somebody else. He told me a certain party he'd been blackmailing knew something juicy about a certain other party. I figure the certain other party was M.M. Macollum. But who is the first party, the one Rosie was blackmailing to start with? It wouldn't be you, Katie Boyle?"

Katie Boyle gasped at the blunt accusation. "No, Ashes! Oh, no! You must believe me!"

"Why?" Ashes lashed.

"Because it looks bad for me, I guess. Listen, I'm going to tell you the truth. When Rosie quit the *News* and went over to the *Clarion*, M.M. told Tony Ross to get on Rosie's tail. Tony was supposed to get proof that Rosie was a blackmailer. In order to do that, Tony made a deal with Jakie

and with me. Jakie knew where Rosie kept the key to his safety deposit box. Jakie used to take papers from the box, give them to me when I had dates with Rosie, and then I'd give them to Tony.

"It worked fine, because when I'd have a date with Rosie, I'd go up to his apartment early, get the papers from Jakie, hand them over to Tony sometime during the evening. Tony would duck out and read them, then give them back to me. When Rosie took me home, we'd stop in his apartment for a drink, and I'd give the papers back to Jakie. In that way, Tony managed to read almost everything in Rosie's safety deposit box."

"What a woman," Ashes marveled. "And something like this happened two weeks ago at the Sport Club?"

Katie nodded jerkily. "That night I got an envelope from Jakie. I gave it to Tony at the Sport Club. Tony made a phone call, then went out. When he returned to the Sport Club, he told Rosie that M.M. wanted to see him.

Then Tony told me that this time I wouldn't have to return the envelope to Jakie, that M.M. was keeping *this* one. The jig was up."

"Did you know what was in the envelope?" Ashes demanded.

"Honest, Ashes, I've told you all I know. I'll bet even Tony didn't know."

"The hell he didn't," Ashes snapped. "Just wait—" He broke off. High heels were tapping in the corridor. Marin Moerly came in, green eyes flashing to Ashes. She held out a key wordlessly.

ASHES strode into M.M. Macolum's private office, Marin following. He bent to the strong drawer, swore softly. The last time he'd studied that drawer, he had wedged a piece of match stem in the lock. There was no match there now. It meant that the drawer had been opened. Ashes didn't even bother opening it now. He faced Marin Moerly.

"Okay," he said. "You had a key.

It's not likely anyone else had. What did you take out of this drawer?"

She was going to try to brazen it out. Then she paled at the sight of Ashes' face. He was iron now.

"Tony said there might be evidence there," she whispered. "I let him look. He didn't—find anything."

"Do you know there's an order out for Tony's arrest?" Ashes poured at her.

"Oh! But Tony was working for Uncle Mike—"

"I know that part," said Ashes. "Look, kiddo, don't play dumb. You own the *News* now, don't you? What are you going to do about the propaganda policy?"

"Why, I'm going to stop it," Marin said quickly. "I didn't know what was going on until Tony told me today. He had to tell me in order to explain who you are and why you were interested in Uncle Mike. Certainly, I'm going to stop it. No one has a hold on me. You don't think I'd deliberately continue—"

"Baby, with red hair and green eyes, I don't know what you'd deliberately do." Ashes brushed past her. . . .

Ashes hadn't realized how fast the time flew. By the time he had a sandwich, the blonde receptionist would be ready for their date. And Ashes was looking forward to this. He figured it would be something. It was. It wasn't what he'd expected, but it certainly was something.

The blonde lived in a walk-up in Brooklyn. Ashes walked up.

There was a radio playing, but no one answered the door. Ashes turned the knob. The door opened. He walked in and sprawled on a chair. The blonde was probably dressing.

But she wasn't. Ashes decided that ten minutes later after he'd listened intently without hearing a sound from inside. He had a sort of sickish feeling when he prowled into the bedroom. He hoped he was guessing wrong, but he wasn't.

The blonde had been shot through

the throat. She was on the bed. She wasn't pretty.

Nor was there time to think!

Something catapulted through the door behind Ashes and fastened onto his back. A choked voice cursed—but not in English. Blows thudded into Ashes' back and neck and ribs.

The fury of the attack sent Ashes staggering across the room.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" babbled the man behind Ashes. "You murdered her, you swine!"

"You, I take it, are the boy friend," Ashes gritted, straightening to his full height. He pumped backwards until the man on his back crashed into the wall. The man went limp. Ashes whirled, lashed out with sharp splatting jabs. The man folded to the floor.

Ashes looked at him. He was blonde and stocky, pink-cheeked, and his guttural tones were not recognizable as German.

"**S**IMMER down," Ashes advised. "This is certainly tough on you if you liked her. But I didn't have anything to do with it."

Ashes scowled. This was his chance. This blond man was ready to crack wide open. He might be able to blow the top off the whole set up. Ashes wasn't quite sure how to handle the man, though. He didn't want to get rough while the guy had tears in his eyes.

But the tears vanished abruptly, and the man started cursing again. "Then he killed her!" he raged. "He was afraid she'd identify me and I'd incriminate him. I will! I will! I loved that girl!"

"Just tell me," Ashes suggested. "I'll take care of him."

The pink-cheeked man caught himself. His jaw hardened. He started to narrow his eyes.

"Uh-oh!" said Ashes. He reached down and picked the man up. "Can't clam up now," he murmured—and rocked the man with his doubled fist. "Just nod your head, Heinie. You're the guy who was delivering M.M.

Macollum's copy to the reception desk each day. You fell for the blonde. You, the guy who delivered the propaganda. Say no!"

Ashes shook the man. "You're the go-between. Not the big shot. But if you delivered the copy, you know the big shot. Boy, do you know what you're going to do? Listen. You're going to tell me who this guy is. Then you're going to stand up in court and swear to it. Aren't you now?" Ashes rocked him again. "Talk, you Nazi rat!"

The man started to talk. And paid with his life!

The gun that fired the shot was silenced. If the man who fired it hadn't slammed the door after squeezing the trigger, Ashes wouldn't have been able to tell, from the small popping sound, what had happened.

The only way he would have known was by the round black hole that sprang into the blonde man's forehead.

Even so, even though he stood there, holding the dead man in his hands, he found it hard to believe. There was a bullet in the man's brain. The door had slammed. But *could* it have happened?

It made little difference that the door was locked when Ashes started. He went through it as if it had been made of cardboard. He repeated with the next door which led to the hall and stairway. He made lots of noise, and worked off lots of steam. But he was too late to catch the killer. He wound up on the sidewalk with a gang of Brooklyn kibitzers at his heels. . . .

When Jakie opened the door of Roser Slainte's apartment, Ashes threw a punch.

But Jakie was Japanese, and Jakie knew jiu jitsu. Ashes felt his wrist caught in a vise. His arm strained as Jakie applied pressure.

"Please," Jakie pleaded. "I am willing to co-operate."

Ashes was sore, and he felt a little foolish. He figured that now that he knew about the jiu jitsu, he could

start over again and take Jakie. But there was no point to it—yet.

"Co-operate then," Ashes said. "What was in that envelope you gave Katie Boyle two weeks ago?"

Jakie's liquid black eyes were impenetrable. "I suggest you ask Mr. Tony Ross."

"I'm asking you," Ashes growled. "Do you know a stocky, pink-cheeked German spy? Did one like that ever come to see Rosie?"

"His name is Carl Blimmer," Jakie said.

Ashes snapped, "His name *was* Carl Blimmer."

Jakie murmured, "Life is so uncertain."

"Especially in your racket," Ashes added quickly.

"You couldn't prove I am anything but a servant," Jakie said coolly.

"Chum, I don't need proof. You were working for Rosie because he was a newspaperman with pipe lines all over the country. You figured you might tap some of his sources of information. Look, we'll let that go. Whether you know it or not, certain cops have you spotted. You're not getting away with anything. I don't have to worry about that angle unless—" Ashes hauled his automatic from his armpit, hefted it. "Unless," he finished, "I'd have to shoot you while you were 'escaping.'"

JAKIE'S moist eyes rolled. He swallowed and said quietly, "The envelope contained a sheaf of evidence in a murder and abduction case which happened over twenty years ago."

Ashes leaned forward. "Any dates and locations? Names?"

"The name of the town was Marsville, somewhere in New England," Jakie said woodenly. "As I understand the story, one Joseph Cameron shot and killed a George Fellows in an altercation concerning Cameron's attentions to Mrs. Rose Fellows. Cameron was indicted for murder. In the meantime, Mrs. Fellows gave birth to

a baby girl, and died. One night Joseph Cameron escaped and abducted the baby. That, I swear, is everything I know."

Ashes said levelly, "Nuts, Jakie. You're giving me just enough, trying to make me believe you're on the level. Okay, for now. But keep your pants rolled, you grinning little Mikado," he added. . . .

Henry Esterly was a somewhat run-down dynamo when Ashes cruised into the office at the News Building. Esterly's voice was still staccato, gestures quick, bright eyes probing. But the old zip wasn't there.

"Why don't you report to your office?" Esterly lashed at Ashes. "There've been G-men in and out of here all afternoon and night."

Ashes waved it aside. "What do you know about a murder and a snatch that happened twenty-odd years ago in a town called Marsville?"

Esterly swabbed his glistening bald spot. "Good Lord, man! I'm interested in *news*! News is stuff that hasn't happened yet, not something twenty years old. What—"

"Where's Tony Ross?" Ashes cut in.

Esterly looked disgusted. "You're a walking quiz program. Do you think if I knew where Ross is, I wouldn't be on his neck?"

"What orders has Marin Moerly given you?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Esterly snapped. "She told you first. No more pro-Nazi junk. No more. You want a drink, son? I'm living on Scotch."

"You look it," Ashes said.

Then the break came. The phone rang.

Esterly scooped it up, said, "Hunh?" twice and then erupted, his temper getting the best of him. "Yes, he's here. Where are you? Where have you been? You damned idiot, there's a wanted out for you!"

That was all Ashes needed. He grabbed the phone away from Ester-

ly. "Tony, you moron, where are you?" he bawled.

"At Katie Boyle's apartment. Come on over."

"Brother, will I!" Ashes exclaimed.

CHAPTER V

"**T**ONY'S just a kid in love,"

Katie Boyle said when Ashes loped into her apartment. He swept past her, to confront Tony Ross.

"The only thing that'll stop me from wringing your neck, Tony, is talking," he snapped. "What was the idea of powdering?"

Tony Ross' thin face was taut. His yellow hair was rumpled, his shirt collar wilted. He clenched his jaw.

"Tell him, Tony," Katie Boyle advised. She looked at Ashes. "He's been up to a town called Marsville. He found out something, but he's afraid to tell you because it might hurt Marin Moerly."

Ashes roared, "You mean—"

"All right, all right," Tony said. "I checked up on the Cameron case."

Ashes leered at him. "You can't tell me anything about that that I don't already know. I got it from Jakie. A blind man could see that Joseph Cameron changed his name to M.M. Macollum, and that the abducted daughter of Rose Fellows is now Marin Moerly by name. You think you're telling me!"

"You do have more than muscle at that," Katie Boyle said. "Well, that's the pressure that was put on M.M. to make him print propaganda. He was afraid if this case came out Marin would be hurt. He adored Marin—"

"You don't have to convince me," Ashes growled. "The only thing screwier than a guy in love with a gal is a parent in love with a child. Okay, Tony, what else? Who knew about this affair? Who held it over M.M.'s head?"

A cop named Schimmel resigned from the Marsville police force and dropped out of sight, just about the time those records and evidence were

stolen from the police files. I read all this in back issues of a Marsville newspaper. The whole story is that Rose Fellows' husband was a lush and a wife beater. M.M. caught the guy beating her one night and killed him, then took the baby girl and lammed. You can imagine how that story would wreck Marin's life if it came out."

Ashes said thoughtfully, "This cop Schimmel found M.M. and blackmailed him for years. When Herr Hitler started cutting up, Schimmel tied up with the Nazis. And then his blackmail took the form of making M.M. print propaganda." Ashes pondered this for a second, then said, "But Roser Slainte said he, Mrs. Slainte's little boy, was the motive for the murder of M.M. What did he mean?"

Katie Boyle said, "Obviously, Rosie meant that ordinarily M.M. never would have got hold of this evidence. The reason M.M. was killed was because once he had that evidence in his hands, the person who'd been blackmailing him, Schimmel, no longer had a hold on him. M.M. could have exposed Schimmel. Schimmel had to kill him."

Ashes nodded. "It rhymes," he said. "If Rosie hadn't got that evidence from Schimmel, it never would have gone back to M.M., and the murder wouldn't have been necessary. So when Rosie said a certain party had told him something juicy about a certain other party, he meant that Schimmel had told him something juicy about M.M. Macollum."

"There it is," Ashes decided. "Schimmel was blackmailing M.M. into printing propaganda with this evidence. Rosie was blackmailing Schimmel on something else. And when Schimmel could no longer pay Rosie money, he turned over this evidence instead. I wonder what Rosie had on Schimmel?"

THE voice that answered wasn't a bit nervous now, not a bit staccato. It was calm, suave, sure. It came from the doorway behind them.

"Rosie had only suspicions," it said. "But he was becoming insistent, and I think he was having me watched. I needed only a little more time to complete my work, so I gave him that evidence to shut him up."

Tony Ross was facing the figure in the door. He paled. Katie Boyle whirled, gasped. Ashes didn't move. He stood riveted to the floor, his back still to the man. His lips were ragged. He said through clenched teeth, casually, "It comes back to me now. M.M.'s body was huddled in that closet. It was pushed back. It was face down. Yet you took only one look and said, 'Strangled with his own necktie!'"

Ashes turned now, without haste. He knew what he was going to do, and he was not afraid. "Only the murderer could have known that, Esterly," he said.

The transformation which had occurred in Henry Esterly was unbelievable. His former nervousness had been an act. Now he was ice. The Luger pistol he held close to his paunch was firm as if it were imbedded in concrete.

"You were stupid not to have known at once," he said to Ashes.

Ashes let his black eyes travel slowly over Esterly. He looked as if he were completely detached from his surroundings. He looked almost inhuman.

"I have a .45 caliber automatic in a shoulder holster," Ashes said, without emphasis. "I'm going to kill you, Esterly."

Only Esterly's eyes moved. "I can shoot you three times before your hand touches it," he said. "The impact of a Luger slug—"

"We'll see," Ashes said simply.

"Ashes!" Katie Boyle screamed. "Don't!"

"I've got to," Ashes said. "Somebody always has to get guys like him. He's not a man. He's going to kill us all. He killed that little blonde recep-

tionist because his stooge, Carl Blimmer, fell for her, and he thought maybe Blimmer had told the girl something. He killed Blimmer in my arms, because when Blimmer saw the girl dead, he was going to crack."

"He was a weakling," Esterly said contemptuously. "We have no place for weaklings in the new order. Look at me. Is there anything weak about me? Do you honestly believe you'll ever pull the trigger on that gun, Bly?"

Ashes drew in his breath. "Look at me, Esterly. Do you believe there's a power under the sun that can stop me?"

"You're a fool," Esterly said. "But you have courage. I can give you power you never dreamed of. A plane is waiting for me. My work here is done."

"How did you plant that bomb in Rosie's apartment?"

ESTERLY'S lips curled. "I followed Tony Ross when he went to Slainte's apartment this afternoon. It was simple to open the apartment door and put the package with the rest of the mail."

Ashes set himself.

"Ashes!" Katie screamed again. It was happening.

Ashes wasn't tense. He was completely relaxed. His brown face was a mask. His arms hung loosely.

"Say it," Esterly mocked. "Don't you always say 'ashes to ashes—dust to dust' when you kill a man?"

There was silence. There was complete absence of motion. There was no life whatever. Only death. Swift, grim, immediate death.

The expression on Ashes' lips was not a smile. It was the expression men wear when they face death for what they know is good. Ashes lips moved.

"Ashes to ashes—dust to dust—"

He moved!

Katie Boyle fainted, sprawling forward between him and Esterly. Esterly wasn't fazed. He was precise.

The Luger jumped in his hand. Ashes was in a half crouch. The impact of the slug was what he was braced against. But even braced, the shock of it straightened him out again.

Esterly's first shot was off center and high. Not because his aim was bad, but because Ashes was in motion. Ashes got his hand to his lapel.

Esterly's second bullet ploughed into Ashes' shoulder. This time he wasn't braced, and it spun him. His fingers touched his .45. He pulled it half out as he went down.

Esterly's face was livid now. He sighted deliberately. But he had to wait for Ashes to sprawl. In the second that Ashes' body stilled against the floor, Esterly would fire for the last time.

Tony Ross had been paralyzed. Now he jerked to his feet and threw the first thing he laid his hands on. It was an ash tray. It didn't come within five feet of Esterly.

Esterly turned slightly and snapped a shot at Tony. The bullet broke Tony's shoulder, and he went down.

"You—louse!"

It was inevitable. The rabbit little man finally had caught up with Ashes. He hurled himself at Esterly.

Esterly sidestepped neatly. He was still perfectly controlled. The little man hurtled past him. Esterly threw his fourth shot.

IT WAS the third time he'd fired at Ashes. It was the third time Ashes was hit. A direct hit this time. Ashes coughed blood.

But his .45 was out now. Levelled. Aimed. Sheer will to kill held Ashes conscious.

He fired.

He fired straight and true. He aimed for Esterly's mid-section. He hit it. Twice.

Esterly died standing. His Luger coughed once more, fitfully, as he dropped.

The rabbit little man goggled. "Geez!" he gulped.

Ashes coughed. "Barney," he whispered. "Help me."

"Ashes—sure! Geez, sure! What do you want?"

"Pull me over to him, Barney. Hurry! I'm passing out."

The little man chewed his lips. "Sure, Ashes, sure." He put his hands under Ashes' armpits and tried to be careful.

Ashes pawed with one hand, trying to drag himself. He refused to pass out till he'd made sure. He got to Esterly's body. He was groggy. He peered stupidly into Esterly's glazing eyes.

"He's dead, Ashes!" squealed the little man. "You got him."

Ashes opened his mouth. Blood spurted from his lips. He stuck his automatic against Esterly's side and squeezed the trigger.

Ashes emptied his gun into Esterly. He squeezed convulsively on the trigger a half-dozen times after the gun had stopped firing.

The little man gagged.

"Don't look like that, Barney," Ashes whispered. "It's okay. It isn't as if he were a man. He's not. He's a symbol, Barney. That's the only way to kill a symbol. Barney, get the girl out of here."

"Sure Ashes, sure."

"And, Barney, it was just a gag, me stealing your cab—just a gag, Barney. I was going to—pay the meter. You know that."

"Geez, Ashes! Geez, I ain't sore. Honest, I ain't." The little man was frankly crying now. Tears made dirty streaks on his weathered cheeks. "I'm a nut about jokes myself, Ashes. I got a kick out of it. Honest, I—Ashes! Don't, Ashes!"

"Forget it, Barney," Ashes mumbled. "I'm only one. How about the rest—over there? You know, Barney, ashes to ashes—dust to dust. . . ."

"Ashes! Geez! Ashes!"

The little man sobbed uncontrollably.

Satan's Payroll



By
J. Lane Linklater

"LITTLE" JOHN was just coming out of an employment agency on Howard Street when the stranger spoke to him. The stranger was going to offer him a job, but Little John didn't know that.

The idea of offering someone like Little John a job had been born not long before in the shabby semblance

of an office several blocks away. There were three men in this office: Daconi, a fairly tall man with a thin pointed nose and wary eyes; Louis, a slender young man who had an easy cunning smile; and Tyson, a very plump, fat-faced older man with a sharp weasel-like gaze.

"It's gonna be a tough job," Daconi had just said, "getting that girl

Little John was broke, hungry, and jobless. And he grabbed at the chance to accept a stranger's promising proposition. But Little John didn't know that the job would bring him blows and bullets—instead of grub and greenbacks.

down over the bluff and along the beach. It's close to a thousand feet down the bluff to the beach."

"We can rope her arms," Louis suggested, "but keep her legs free, and make her walk. You can walk down ahead of her and hold one end of the rope, and I can walk behind holding the other end. Doing it like that, she can't make a getaway."

"A good idea," approved Tyson.

Daconi's grin was sarcastic. He said: "Sure. A good idea—for you. You'd be safe enough. But that footpath down the bluff is narrow as hell, and slopes out over the beach in places. It's bare there, too—no brush to hang on to. If the dame jerked on the rope, she'd go over—and so would Louis and me!"

Tyson shrugged. But Louis nodded—he understood the danger. A thousand-foot walk down over the edge of a steep bluff in the darkness of the night, by way of a tricky footpath, was hazardous enough, even with no one to watch but oneself. And not one of them—Louis, Daconi, or the big-bellied Tyson—was an outdoor man; each one of them was in fear of the hazards of nature.

"That little fool is likely to try anything," Daconi muttered.

"And Latch would be sore as hell if we didn't get her down there," added Louis.

Tyson chuckled. "Not only that," he said, "but we got to meet him with the girl, or we don't get the dough."

They were silent for a little while.

From where Tyson was sitting, behind a scratched desk, he could see the reversed letters of his name on the glass of the door: **MAX TYSON—ATTORNEY**. The nature of

his law business was sometimes a matter of keen interest to the police.

Presently Daconi spoke again. "How about getting some guy to do the job for us—some big dumb guy that's used to climbing around hills?"

The others thought about that for several silent moments.

"Might work," agreed Tyson presently. "Some big punk that's hungry."

"Great stuff," approved Louis. "But we'd have to croak the guy when we was through with him."

"That's settled then," said Daconi. The necessity of croaking the guy wasn't important enough to call for discussion. "We ain't got much time. It'll be dark soon. I'll go up to the slave market right now and see if I can pick a guy up."

"Be sure he's hungry," warned Tyson.

Daconi grinned. "Dumb guys are always hungry," he said.

DACONI went out. And a few minutes later he saw Little John. Daconi had to look up at him because Little John was five inches higher than six feet. He had oxlike shoulders, and hands that looked like chair-bottoms for size.

"Hello, brother," Daconi said smoothly. "Looking for a job?"

Little John gazed at him in his slow deliberate fashion, and then nodded. He did not speak. He was not much good at talking, and when he did say anything it was in a queer stilted way as if he had been trying to read books in his spare time. The truth was that he needed a job quickly. He had always worked in camps—lumber camps, railroad camps, construction camps, camps of all kinds.

And when he returned to the city at the end of a job, usually with about three months' wages in his pocket, it might take him three days to get robbed of his money; three days, but not more.

For the last three days he had been trying to get a job in a ship-building plant, but he was always asked for his birth certificate. It bewildered him. Anyhow, that created too big a problem for Little John, since even the name of the little village in the middle of Europe where he had been born had been long lost to his memory.

"Okay, big boy," Daconi said heartily. "I can fix you up with a good job right now."

Little John hesitated a moment. Then, silently, he moved along with Daconi. They walked to Fourth Street, and down Fourth Street several blocks until they came to an old two-story building. A stairway led directly up from the sidewalk to the second floor. Here was a small corridor, off which were three rooms.

Daconi led Little John into one of the rooms. Behind a desk was a very plump, fat-faced man with small sharp eyes. The fat of his face wrinkled in a complacent smile as he saw Little John.

The younger man, Louis, was not present.

"This," Daconi said to Little John, "is Mr. Tyson."

"Mr. Tyson," Little John repeated very respectfully.

Tyson said: "What's your name, my man?"

"People call me Little John. I am put down on the payroll as John Jack. My name was long—very long—so I am just put down as—"

"That's very good," Tyson said, beaming. "You belong here in San Francisco?"

"I belong—anywhere," said Little John.

"But do you have folks here, or friends?"

"No people of my own," Little John said sadly, "anywhere."

"That's too bad," Tyson said with great sympathy. His gaze was running up and down Little John's giant frame with peculiar satisfaction. "Well, we have a very good job for you, Little John."

"I like to work," Little John said.

"Nothing hard about this," Tyson assured him. "And we'll have a big feed for you later!"

"I would like to eat," Little John requested, "before starting."

"No time for that now," said Tyson. "But a swell feed later—and twenty bucks a day!"

Little John said nothing. And, for a moment, the others said nothing either. Tyson and Daconi were looking at each other, as if to say: "Perfect! Very big, very strong—and very, very dumb!"

"You can start right in," Tyson went on. "Take Little John to the plant," he said to Daconi.

Daconi took Little John out to the corridor. There were stairs running down to the back of the building. They went down and came out on a rear yard, which was adjacent to many other rear yards. The yards were littered with old boxes and refuse. They pushed through gaps in ancient fences and presently came to the back entrance of a building similar to the one they had left.

AS DACONI glanced about quickly, he saw that there was no one in sight. It was dusk now, almost dark. They could hear the traffic on the street on which the building faced, but no one could see in.

Little John stood waiting patiently.

Daconi snapped his knuckles against the door three times. In a few moments footsteps slurred toward the door from the inside, and it was opened, carefully.

Louis was standing just inside. He

smiled at Daconi, and then at Little John. Little John noticed that he kept one hand in his coat pocket. Louis let them in and gently closed the door.

"John," said Daconi, "this is my pal, Louis."

Little John gazed at Louis blankly. "All right," he said. "But where's the job?"

Louis laughed softly. "Right this way," he said.

They walked through an unfurnished dusty room and up a dingy stairway. In a moment they were in a bedroom. On a bed a girl was lying. She was, so far as Little John could see, a pretty girl, with brown eyes. Her ankles and arms were tied with rope, and there was a cloth about her face, so that she couldn't talk.

Little John stared at her. Then he started toward her. Louis stood in his way, and he stopped.

"Wait a minute," Louis said quietly. "Leave her—"

"But it is not right," Little John said stolidly.

He started forward again. Louis' hand came out of his pocket. A gun pressed against Little John's side.

"Better do as Louis says," Daconi said from the doorway. "If you don't, it'll be too bad for you—and for the girl, too."

John hesitated. "But the job," he said. "Where's the job?"

Louis stepped away from him, sat down on the bed, still facing Little John, with his gun on his knee.

Daconi closed the door and came in. He said soothingly: "That's right. You do the job the way we want it and everything's going to be okay." He looked at his watch. "The boss is about due. You can start your job now. Pick up the little lady."

Little John stood in deep thought. He glanced slowly about him. Louis was still fingering his gun. Daconi, too, now had an automatic in his hand.

Abruptly, Little John strode to the bed, reached down his massive hands and lifted the girl in his arms. She was helpless, and seemed like a baby cradled against his chest, but he had never seen so much defiance in anyone's eyes.

"Okay," Daconi said sharply. "We go out the way we came in."

Little John went down the stairs and out of the house again. Daconi went ahead of him, and Louis just behind him. It was quite dark now. They moved cautiously around to the side of the house, into a narrow driveway.

A large touring car was waiting there. Tyson was in it.

They all got in. The girl was sitting beside Little John, leaning against him. He wanted to tear her bonds from her, but he knew that these men would take such a movement as a signal to harm her as well as him.

They drove away, down through the neck of the peninsula. The men sat easy, yet tense, and silent. Little John lost track of time. They drove for hours, south, close to the coast, the headlights carefully dimmed. There were times when Little John could hear the surf beating against the shore.

It was very late when the car turned into a rough road, and then across a field. Presently it stopped.

Tyson spoke: "Okay, boys."

They got out. A cold sea breeze swept in on them. They were on a high bluff. Far below, and out toward the west, Little John could see the movements of the water in the moonlight.

TYSON spoke to Little John, and his voice seemed hushed. "Here's the biggest part of your job. There's a beach down below here—nearly a thousand feet down. There's a narrow footpath over the bluff, and it's damn near straight down. You carry the girl."

Again, the girl was in Little

John's arms. The moonlight was just bright enough to make the footpath dimly visible. Daconi went ahead. Little John followed with the girl. Then came Louis and Tyson.

It was a difficult descent. The footpath was never much over a foot wide, and often sloped a little outward, over the beach below them. Carrying the girl, in itself, was child's play for Little John—like carrying a doll. But the uncertainty of the sloping uneven path, and the lack of anything upon which to hold, called for iron muscle and steady nerve.

No one spoke on the downward climb. Presently they arrived on the beach below. The girl had lain quiet in Little John's arms. She had produced a queer feeling in him. He had never before held a girl so close to him. This one, he felt, was unafraid, dauntless, yet he wanted to protect her.

It was a boulder-strewn beach, the boulders practically covering the beach, slime-covered, slippery. Little John stood at the foot of the path, waiting. For a little while the others stood still, too, sweating and puffing.

"Up that way," Tyson directed presently.

Little John proceeded doggedly, the others close to him. It was painfully slow progress. There was no straight walking, only continual climbing over boulders. They went on for about half an hour, coming then to the end of the beach, and up into some woods.

In the woods was a cottage. Daconi unlocked the door and they went in. Two oil lamps were lit.

There were three rooms, roughly furnished. Each of the small windows was carefully blacked out. Little John, still carrying the girl, was ordered into one of the rooms, in which were a couch and two chairs. He laid the girl gently on the couch.

The others followed them into the room.

Tyson chuckled. "That's most of your job done," he said pleasantly.

"Then," said Little John, "I may go now?"

"Not yet. We might need you some more. Besides, Latch will want to see you." Tyson grinned. "Latch will get a big kick out of you, Little John."

Little John shrugged a huge shoulder. He had no intention of leaving the girl, anyway. The others quietly left the room, and he could hear a key rasp in the lock. He looked about the room. There was one window. He went to it at once. Just beneath it, no doubt, was the ocean.

The girl on the couch stirred. Little John turned and approached her. Obviously, Tyson and his men no longer were concerned about keeping her bound, and Little John quickly cut her ropes.

She sat up, stared at him. It was the first time he had seen her clearly. She looked prettier now, in spite of the sharp-rounded chin and the utter lack of fear in her eyes. But she was very small and seemed, to him, helpless.

It took her some time to get her breath. "Who are you?" she said then.

"I am put down on the payroll," Little John said, "as John Jack. I was hired by these men to do a job. I did not know what the job was. Now I would like to help you."

The girl laughed. "I think they're going to kill me," she said.

Little John gazed at her unbelievably. "Kill you!"

There was wonder in her eyes as she looked at him. "Did you ever hear of Bill Latch?"

Little John shook his head.

"But don't you ever read the papers?"

Little John shook his head again. "Not much. Only books—"

"WELL, Latch is a big-time crook," the girl told him. "I was with him for a while. He got me before I was old enough to know what it was all about. I ain't trying to alibi myself, but I never had folks to put me right. But I got wise—and then I quit him!"

Little John nodded. He said: "You are still only a child. And there are bad people in the world."

"You bet there are! Latch is one of the worst. But I kept out of his way. Then he got my brother Jim mixed up with him—and Jim got croaked. I got sore then and went to the cops with some stuff I had on Latch. He was pinched on a murder rap."

"That," Little John said solemnly, "was a good thing."

"Sure. But he made a getaway."

"He escaped from the police?"

She nodded her thick reddish hair briskly. "You see the setup now? This place here is a hide-out for Latch's crowd. I ain't never been here before — didn't know just where it was. They nabbed me and brought me here to meet Latch. He'll be showing up—maybe coming up the coast in a boat. He—"

The door opened suddenly. A man was standing in the doorway. He was strongly built, but a little too fat. His eyes were dark and hard. The brow over the left eye seemed to be pulled so far down as to almost conceal it. The right eye was open wide, as if to take in everything there was to see.

He was looking at the girl steadily.

"Okay, Latch," said the girl cheerily. "I'm here!"

Latch's thin-lipped mouth shaped in a humorless grin. "Yeah," he said. "And you ain't gonna like it!"

He entered, snapped the door shut behind him. Slowly, he approached the girl. She did not retreat.

Latch's hand shot out, grasped her wrist, twisted it.

"You dirty little double-crosser," he said. "I've got you—"

Little John's left hand descended on his shoulder, spun him around like a top. Latch stared at him for a moment, then his hand went for his shoulder holster. Little John's right fist jerked forward, crashed against Latch's jaw, sent him sailing backwards against the wall. For a moment he lay stunned.

Little John stood in the center of the room, staring at him in dull anger.

"Look out!" the girl cried at Little John.

Latch was moving again, his hand sneaking for his gun. But Little John did not move. The girl ran between them, shielding Little John. Latch cursed her thickly.

"Get the hell out of the way," he snarled, "or I'll get you right now!"

The girl laughed. "I'm not afraid of you! Go ahead and—"

The door was flung open again. The others rushed in, Daconi first. Latch hesitated, struggled to his feet, stood uncertainly.

Latch's wide-open right eye looked murderous. Blood was streaking down his face. Then, suddenly, he grinned.

"I almost made a mistake," he said. "There ain't gonna be any stiffes for the cops to find this time!"

Little John gazed at him unwaveringly. "You are a madman," he said.

Latch roared. "Sure. I'm crazy—crazy like a fox! Why did I get knocked off on that last job? Because I was fool enough to leave the stiff right in plain sight, right where I croaked him! I always done it like that—thought I was being smart. Well, no more!"

Tyson cackled from the doorway. "You're right, Latch," he said. "Never let 'em find the body!"

LATCH was glaring at the girl again. "You doubled on me—"

and without you the law ain't got a thing on me. So you're just gonna disappear—and you ain't coming back."

The girl laughed, too. Little John looked at her admiringly. She jeered at Latch: "Are you coming with me, punk?"

"Part way," said Latch. "We're gonna load you with lead—inside and out! And we're going to take you five miles out to sea and leave you there. The stiffs never come back when they're fixed that way!"

Little John said again: "You are a madman."

Latch leered at him. "I'm sure glad the boys brought you along, chum. The boat is a quarter of a mile from here. We can use you to tote the little cat along. Let's get going!"

Tyson spoke quietly from the doorway. "We ought to eat first. The stuff's all ready."

Latch didn't hesitate. "Sure," he said. "Let's eat."

"We promised Little John a feed, too," Tyson added.

Latch laughed loud. "Why, sure," he said heartily. "Give him plenty." He spoke to the girl. "You, too."

"I ain't eating with you," she snapped.

"I do not want to eat," said Little John.

Latch chuckled. "That's okay. But we always eat good here. Keep a lot of stuff on hand all the time."

In a moment or two, Latch and the others had left the room. Again, the key turned in the lock.

Little John stared at the closed door.

"Pretty tough bunch, huh?" said the girl.

"Bad," muttered Little John. "But the fat one—he's too—"

"Tyson!" The girl laughed. "He's yellow, but he's the worst of the lot. And he's sure handy with a tommy gun. They probably got one on the boat, too."

Little John wagged his head.

"You should've eaten, big boy," the girl reproved him.

Little John was silent. . . .

Presently Latch returned, with the others. "Let's go," he said.

The girl laughed at him. "The big boy ain't ready to go."

"He'll carry you," Latch said savagely. "You'll let him carry you, or I'll drill *him* right here. And he'll carry you, or I'll drill *you* right here."

The girl smiled at Little John. "We don't care, do we, big boy?"

But Little John shook his head. "I don't want to see him shoot you," he said.

The girl stared at him, as if surprised, and a little disappointed. But Little John simply reached down and picked her up. She struggled a little at first, then rested quietly in his arms.

They went out, along a narrow hallway to a rear door. Daconi led the way. The others followed Little John, close behind him.

A footpath led away from the house, through the woods. Someone behind Little John turned on a dimmed flashlight, keeping Little John in the light. He trudged on, the girl held close to his breast, and in a little while they emerged on a small sandy beach.

A twenty-foot power boat was tied to a small landing wharf. They walked several yards past the wharf.

"Set her down," Latch ordered briskly.

Little John held the girl a moment longer, and then dropped her lightly on her feet.

"**T**HE tide ain't full in yet," Latch went on. "We can drill these two right here on the sand, and in a couple of hours the water will wash away all the evidence. Then we can tie 'em both up in some old canvas, leaded down, and throw 'em on the boat. That way there won't be no blood either."

"That's the idea," approved Tyson. "No evidence—and especially no bodies!"

Louis and Daconi were standing back a little. The light of the moon filtered through the clouds and showed them standing darkly, each holding an automatic.

There was silence then for a little while. Little John watched the others, the girl at his side. Quietly, as if they knew what to do without talking about it, they were edging together.

Soon they would be almost side by side—Latch and Louis and Daconi—with Tyson a little apart from them, all facing Little John and the girl. Behind Little John was the ocean, lapping gently into the tiny cove in which the boat was moored.

It was clear to Little John that there would be no more talk. He felt bewildered. There was only one definite thought in his mind; that he had carried this girl here, and that it was his duty to carry her away again.

"All okay, boys?" It was Latch talking. His voice was low, yet with a queer high-pitched note in it—a mad note.

The others mumbled a response.

Little John sighed heavily. And as he sighed, his left hand swept around and caught the girl at the side of the head. She went down as if struck by a falling timber, and lay still.

Latch cursed hoarsely, started forward. Little John surged toward him. Latch stopped in his tracks. Flame leaped from his gun, but Little John kept going, closed in on him, swept him into his arms, crushed him. Latch gasped, dropped his gun.

There was a crackling sound, as of bones crushing. Latch was wriggling feebly. Little John loosened his right hand, snapped upwards with his elbow. Latch went limp in his arms.

"Let him have it!" It was Tyson shrieking. But Little John was shielded by Latch.

Tyson started to run for the protection of the boat.

Suddenly, Little John dropped Latch on the sand, reached down and scooped up Latch's gun.

Both Louis and Daconi fired at him, wildly, but he went forward again, as if singing lead meant nothing. He was holding Latch's gun by the barrel, making no effort to fire it. Again, they both fired. He was up to them now. Holding the gun in the flat of his hand, he smacked it against Louis' head.

Louis went down without a sound.

Daconi was swinging around, taking quick aim, but in an instant Little John had whirled. Again came a sickening crack, and Daconi dropped.

Daconi lay on the sand, moaning curses. He was still clenching his automatic, trying to lift it.

Tyson, from the boat, yelled at him shrilly: "Aim for his belly, you fool!"

Little John was about to turn. Daconi's gun flamed once more. For a little while John stood quite still. His hand fumbled near his middle.

"You got him, Daconi!" Tyson yelled exultantly. "You got him!"

But Daconi was silent now, and very still. It was quiet. Then something broke the silence; it was the girl's voice, calling feebly.

STEADILY, but slowly, Little John swung about and went to the girl. She was trying to get to her feet, but he reached down and took her in his arms. In the moonlight, she looked very pale, but there was a smile on her face.

On the boat, farther back down the beach, there was silence. No word came from Tyson. Then came sounds — indefinite, threatening sounds.

The girl spoke in a low voice to

Little John. "I heard a bunch of shots. Didn't they hit you?"

"Maybe," Little John said deliberately, "once. But I think they were too full of food. And these wicked people—they aim for the face, which is all right when the victim is shut up in a room or a car, but not—"

"But I heard Tyson yell to shoot you in the belly. How about that?"

"I feel a little tickle there," Little John admitted.

"A little tickle!" gasped the girl.

"A shot in the stomach," said Little John, "is very bad—unless the stomach is empty. Then it may not damage so much."

"You mean your stomach is empty?"

Little John drew the girl closer. "These men," he said, "made the mistake of choosing one who is out of work. I have eaten nothing in three days!"

The girl sighed. "What now, big boy?"

"I carried you here. Now I carry you back!"

"Not so easy," said the girl. "It's going to be tough. We can't make the woods from here without going past the boat—and Tyson's there with the machine gun!"

Little John stood the girl on her feet again. "You stay here," he said.

She caught his arm. "That empty stomach of yours," she said, "ain't going to help you against a machine gun. And that's one thing Tyson can handle okay. He can drill us—"

Her voice was lost in the sudden menacing crackle from the boat. At the same instant, Little John's hand slammed her down into the sand, and he dropped beside her. Bullets sang over their heads, then abruptly ceased.

The girl said nothing more, but lay close to Little John. Little John glanced about. Obviously, there was no escape anywhere in the little cove except back by way of the

woods, and it was impossible to reach there except by going past the boat.

And there was no spot in the cove that wasn't within reach of the machine gun.

The moonlight made every object visible.

Not over twenty yards away, the boat bobbed gently against the ten-foot wharf, the platform of which hung over the water, perched on timbers sunk into the soil. The worn timbers swayed and creaked. The outgoing tide tugged at the boat and strained the stout rope that held it.

There was no way of getting at those ropes without being completely exposed to machine-gun fire at close range.

The girl whispered to Little John: "Tyson is moving the machine gun forward so he can hit us lying down!"

Little John said: "You stay here."

He started forward on his stomach. She jerked at his sleeve.

"Don't do that! He'll get you—"

"You stay here," Little John said again.

THE girl sighed a little, as if, for the first time in her life, it pleased her to obey orders. Little John moved forward, toward the boat. His form was like a great sea monster's, wriggling across the sand, every movement taking him away from the girl, nearer the wharf.

He vanished into the water.

At the same moment, the machine gun again tore the silence into shreds. Obviously, Tyson had seen Little John and was aiming at him; lead splintered the top of the wharf.

The girl lay silent, her body taut, eyes straining for a sight of Little John.

Presently the machine gun was quiet again. The seconds wore on. No movement was visible.

The girl's gaze never wavered from the spot at which Little John had disappeared. If some of that machine-gun fire had caught him, he would never come out of the water.

Then, presently, a giant form emerged, crawling out of the surf. Soundlessly and slowly, but very steadily, it moved, crablike, toward the girl. Soon it was beside her.

The girl spoke low: "You all right, big boy?"

"Be quiet, and very still," cautioned Little John. "Keep your face well down in the sand, or—"

Again the machine gun sang out. The sand just beyond them, and around about them, spurted up as bullets hit.

Then, once more, there was quiet.

The girl, lying close to Little John, held her face obediently

against the sand. She did not look up for a long time, until Little John spoke again.

"It is all right now," he said.

He got to his feet and lifted her up. She was in his arms again, cradled against his chest.

She exclaimed in astonishment: "The boat is—is on the way out to sea!"

"Yes," said Little John.

"And it's towing something along with it. What—"

"The wharf," said Little John.

"It was easy. The Wharf was old, and the timbers loosened by the tides. I could not get to the ropes, but I got under the wharf—and moved it from its foundations."

He was walking up the beach, carrying her. She laughed against his shoulder. "Cripes!" she murmured. "What this guy can do on an empty stomach!"

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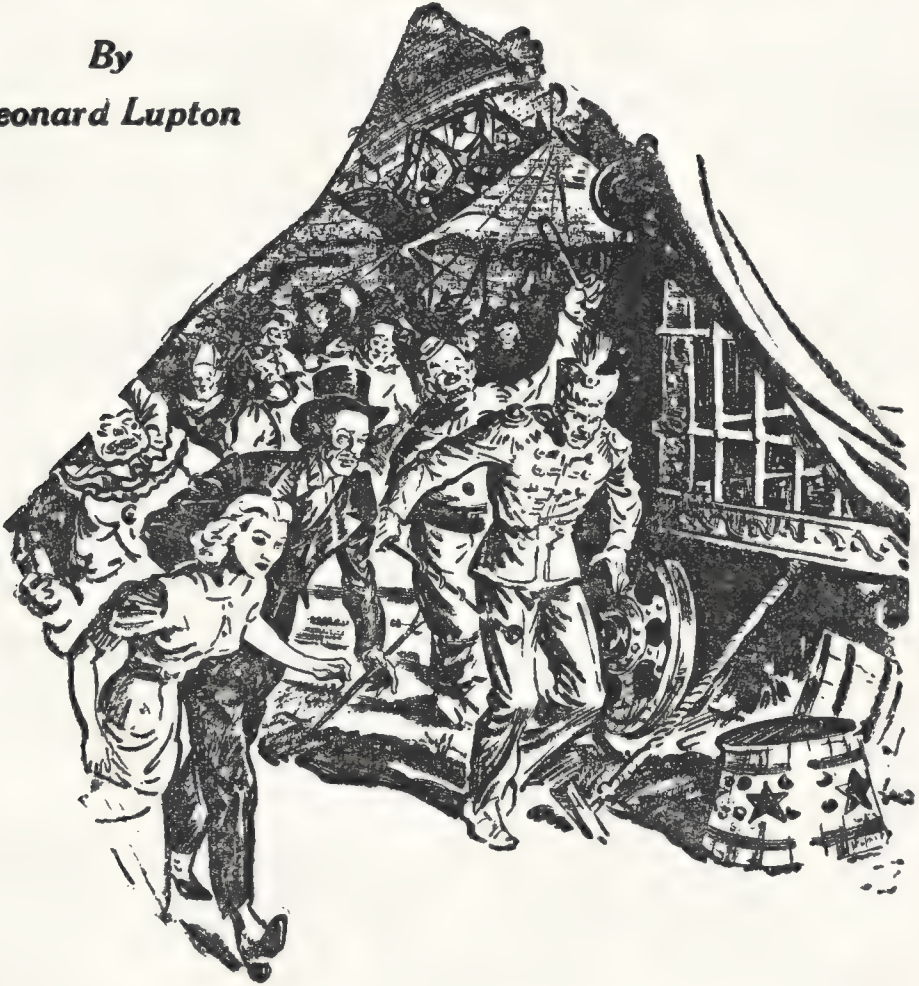
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Big Top Kill-Ride

By
Leonard Lupton



« Tonight was the opening of the Dipperoo, the carnival ride that was the last word in thrills. But before the official premiere, there was an unscheduled rehearsal—that was the last word in murder blueprints. »

WE WERE eating supper in the cookhouse when it happened. It was fully an hour before carnival opening time and the sudden clash and clatter of a thrill-ride going into unexpected action startled every showman on the lot.

What made it ten times worse was the sudden, shrill scream as that thrill-ride clattered to a crescendo. It was the kind of a scream that whirrs through the eardrums and pierces the brain with the cold certainty that horror has struck.

The man sitting next to me at the cookhouse counter swiveled around on the stool. His feet hit the ground running. All along the counter and back at the tables showfolks were getting up and forgetting that they ever had been hungry.

I took out after the guy who had sat next to me. His name was Dan Hopping. He was foreman of the twin ferris wheels—Eli No. 5's on this show. As I pounded along after him I began firing questions.

"What's happened?" I shouted at him. "Why is there a ride in motion this early? Maybe the crew is just testing—"

Dan Hopping flung his answer back across his shoulder as he ran.

"Nobody would be testing *that* ride! It's my new one—the Dipperoo!"

That didn't mean anything to me then. I'd just joined up with the carnival company as a barker on the front of the Fun House. But even before this excitement about the ride got under way I'd had time to find out that everybody on the show was punchy with the jitters.

The ride that was in motion was off at the far end of the midway. I hadn't paid it much attention before; it seemed to be set off from the midway as though it wasn't meant for public use. I wondered about that now as I followed Hopping under the rope fence that circled the ride.

Hopping was swearing and as I looked toward the platform of the ride I felt like swearing, too—or being sick.

It was death in an ugly form. One of the sideshow freaks, Little Eva, had pitched headlong out of the single car of the thrill-ride and crushed her skull when she'd struck the platform. Little Eva was a pinhead—you must have seen her type of freak; midget size or a little larger—with a conical skull coming up almost to a point.

"I was sure it was Eva when I heard that scream," Hopping said. "Remember how she screamed and

covered her ears when she dropped the bag of popcorn back at the cookhouse?"

I remembered all right. That pointed little skull of Eva's hadn't had room for her brain to develop. She was a birdlike little creature with a birdlike brain. Because she was harmless she had been allowed to roam the midway and that fact had annoyed some of the showfolks.

THE whole scene came back to me now. I had just sat down at the counter to eat supper. Eva had got up to leave. A fellow they called Gus, who was a wrestler in the athletic show, had put salt in Eva's cornflakes and that had set her off screaming. Then she'd come back with a bag of popcorn and bumped against Sophie LaVerne, fan dancer in the cootch show.

LaVerne had pinched Eva where it would do the most good. Eva had screamed, and then delighted at her own terror had dropped the popcorn and covered her ears. I'd heard this LaVerne was the boss' girl—and believed it now. Real showfolks are never cruel to the little people.

One of the other showmen, a fellow they called Fiero, had grumbled about the management letting Eva hang around the cookhouse. I remembered Fiero more particularly than the rest because he was the fire-diver on this carnival—what is known as the free act.

I hadn't told anybody, but before joining out with this carnival I had spent a long session in a hospital. And before that, I had been the fire-diver on a carny in the midwest. Ironically, that's where the money was, the free act! But long weeks in a hospital bed, after a slight miscalculation of air currents, had convinced me that I was done with the high ladder for good.

Now, as people crowded around us and the show owner himself came pushing and shoving through the crowd, I was wondering if this had been an accident—or murder. And if it was murder, did we have three live-

ly suspects in Gus, LaVerne, and Fiero?

I tried to remember if any or all of them had been at the cookhouse yet when that ride had gone into action and Eva had screamed. But so many people had been around the cookhouse that I couldn't remember. All I knew for sure was that Eva had been able to get as far as the thrill-ride.

If any one or all three of the others had left at about the same time, they, too—or he, or she—could have been at the thrill-ride. I looked around and I saw Gus and LaVerne, but I didn't see Fiero. Since I had no authority to say or do anything at all I just stood there waiting to see what was going to happen next.

The show manager forced his way through the crowd yelling orders.

"Get back!" he shouted. "Let us get through here!"

The manager was a big man, dressed in plenty of flash. He had pink-barbered cheeks and his eyes were the lightest, coldest blue I had ever seen. His name was Stetter, and something about his whole pink, fleshy appearance reminded me of a baby porker.

"Well, Hopping," he said, and his hand fell heavily on the ride foreman's shoulder, "what did I tell you? That ride is a failure, the way you've built it—a death trap!"

Hopping flinched a little but he didn't cringe. He looked up at the ride. Obviously I can't give you all the details, but the Dipperoo was Hopping's own baby. Experience as a ride foreman during summer vacations plus an engineering degree from college had given Hopping the skill to invent and build the Dipperoo.

The thrill device itself was a one-car ride. It was simple and sound and unquestionably a potential money-maker. The single car of the ride traveled down a narrow trestle, looped-the-loop on a continuation of this trestle and ended against a recoil spring which flung the car back through a trap and left it on an elevator ready to be raised back into position for the

next trip. I had been around carnivals most of my life and had never seen anything like it.

As the crowd milled closer, Stetter, the manager, turned and pushed those nearest him. A thin, dapper man with him had been at the cookhouse earlier tonight while I was eating supper.

"Get back," Stetter said. "Let the police officer here take charge!"

Sophie LaVerne, the fan dancer, ignored his plea. She had been wearing a summery, light-colored coat, and now she thrust this at Stetter.

"Cover the poor thing up," she said. She was sobbing, and it seemed to me that everything she said and did was part of an act. I remembered how she had pinched Eva, only a few minutes before, and made her scream.

But now, under these circumstances, it was easy to be suspicious of everyone. I looked with interest at the man who had accompanied Stetter on that jostling journey through the crowd. He was thin and dapper and he didn't look much like Headquarters to me, but he was speaking to a uniformed policeman who had crowded up from the direction of the pay-gate, and the cop had nodded and gone off.

It was the thin, dapper man who called for attention.

"The police will be here in a minute," he said. "We can't disturb anything until the coroner holds a preliminary inquest. I'd suggest that none of you leave."

Hopping, too, stood within the half circle, near Eva's body; and finally it was to him that LaVerne appealed, again holding out the coat.

"Cover the poor thing up—I can't bear the sight—"

HOPPING flung the coat over the small, crumpled body. As he did so he gave LaVerne a curious glance. I wondered if it had seemed to him, as it had seemed to me, that she was laying it on too thick. I didn't want to go corny with suspicion—but after all, she had pinched Eva earlier this evening and made her scream and cover

her ears. It hadn't been any loving or playful pinch.

The thin, dapper man glanced at Hopping as he flung the coat over Eva. He said curiously, "It was your hammer, wasn't it, Hopping, that was flung through the window of the office wagon this morning?"

Hopping started and turned quickly.

"Sure—my name was on it. Proof enough that I didn't throw it!" he said swiftly. "I've never had any trouble with Mr. Stetter—"

The detective looked at Stetter.

"I suppose that's true or he wouldn't say so in front of you. Tell me, Stetter—this man is dressed like a ride foreman. Did he have anything to do with the ride-car on that other riding device that broke loose and smashed through the rail?"

"No," said Stetter promptly. "And he didn't throw the hammer. I explained that to you when you arrived. Someone is trying to disrupt things on this show, but I'll swear that Dan Hopping had nothing to do with any of these accidents."

"But he is the inventor and builder of this ride, isn't he?" The detective nodded toward the riding device which had flung Eva to her death.

"I am," Hopping spoke quietly. "But I don't understand how Eva fell out. There was a safety-belt, and even if that wasn't fastened, there was a bar across the seat for her to hang on to. Eva wasn't too bright, maybe—but sheer instinct would have caused her to get a life-and-death grip on that bar."

"Apparently," said the detective, "it was the *death* grip she got! I suppose this ride is included in the new liability insurance which covered the accident on the other ride?"

Stetter spoke up with the answer ahead of Hopping.

"It is," he said quickly. "While the ride wasn't ready until tonight, I included it in a blanket policy. Since ownership reposes in my name I could do that. And I own it—as Hopping will verify."

"Well—" said Hopping. He took a deep breath and nodded, and I saw the faintest gleam of triumph in Stetter's eyes.

The detective shrugged. "In that case, there seems to be no direct violation of any law, excepting that someone persuaded the freak to take a ride in the car. It would be difficult to prove that there was any murderous intent."

No one said anything. I glanced at Gus and at LaVerne. Already tonight I had seen them both torment Eva; and there had been one other who had joined in making life miserable for the pinhead midget. One who wasn't present at the moment—the diver, Fiero.

More than that, I knew beyond all shadow of doubt now, that Eva had been murdered. I knew that it would be possible to prove as much! But I didn't know why she had been murdered, not yet I didn't; nor by whom.

But one other thing I did know, and as it turned out, it was the thing that was most important of all; I knew where Fiero was right now, and from professional experience in Fiero's own line I was willing to doubt that Fiero had been the murderer.

The cop's gaze swung around the circle of curious faces. He said slowly, "We don't have a medical examiner in this part of the state. We still use the old coroner system. The body can't be moved until the coroner gets here. We'll hold a preliminary inquest then."

Stetter looked at his watch. He swore. He said, "Officer, it's almost opening time. I'll have to shut off the ticket sale at the pay-gate. And there's no point in wasting gasoline to start up any of the rides. I'd like to talk to the ticket-sellers, and since Hopping is a foreman I want him to contact my other foremen—"

The detective hesitated briefly. There was a faint, mocking gleam in his eyes. "All right," he said at last. "You two can go along about your business."

I FIGURED then that the detective could guess what it was all about, too. For I was beginning to guess. For one thing, the detective had sent someone to phone for the coroner. There would be a cop at the front gate to keep the crowd from coming in, and I don't think Stetter fooled anyone on the lot with that talk about wanting Hopping to contact the other ride foremen. All the other ride foremen were right here in the crowd of carnival employees crowded around the Dipperoo.

It was only a few minutes after Stetter and Hopping left the scene that the coroner arrived. He examined the body briefly, studied the cause and effect, and then motioned to the undertaker and his assistant. He said something to the detective, and the detective spoke to the rest of us.

"I'll want you all down at the office wagon," he said. "I particularly want a man named Gus and a woman named LaVerne. I'm certain that neither Hopping nor Stetter were foolish enough to leave the midway." He hesitated a minute and then said: "Has anyone in the crowd seen a man named Fiero? Does anyone know where he is?"

I'm sure that by then a good half of the carnival employees present knew where Fiero was, just as I knew, and had known, all along. It was an interesting study in mob psychology. No one spoke.

"No?" he said. "Well—we'll pick him up. Meanwhile, remember please that there's a cordon of police thrown around the midway. It will go tougher than ever with the man who tries to walk off this lot."

As I turned to attend to some business of my own, I wondered if Stetter had had time to finish trapping Hopping in this web that he had spun. For there wasn't any question in my mind—regardless of the person he had used to accomplish his purpose—that Stetter was responsible for the death of Eva.

The cop was hardly out of sight in

the direction of the ticket wagon when the babble of excitement broke out. There was no longer any question of where Fiero was.

With the cop gone, half the faces on the lot turned upward. It is axiomatic that a person hardly ever sees above the level of his own eyes when he's talking, and the cop had been doing a great deal of talking.

Fiero was on the high ladder above the tank into which he dived nightly. I would say from my own experience that he had gone up there to test the rigging and that what he had seen from that breezy perch had frozen him immobile.

Most of the crowd waited right there by the Dipperoo, but—out of professional curiosity, let us say—I sauntered over to the base of the ladder.

"Fiero," I called to him. "The cop's gone. Come on down."

Maybe I was shaking a little. This was as close as I had been to a high ladder since the accident.

"Fiero!" I said again.

He looked down at me. I could see his face. It was mocking. Fiero didn't know anything about me, except that I was a newcomer—the barker for the Fun House. No wonder he smirked. I had no right to demand that he come down and tell his story. He knew that. But there was something that Fiero didn't know.

"Yeah?" he said mockingly, down the breeze. "You want me, huh? You come and get me then!"

"Fiero," I said, "the cops will throw a cordon around this tank when they find you're up there. Then they'll shoot you down. Come on down now. Tell us your story—"

"Go away," said Fiero. He was maybe halfway up that ladder and I could hear him clearly. "I don't know you. I don't want anything to do with you or cops. Carny people stick together. Go away."

Carny people stick together? If I hadn't been shaking so with the knowledge of what I had to do I might have

laughed. Carny people stick together all right—and Fiero didn't think I belonged.

Well, that was my fault. Shame at the knowledge that I would never dive again had sealed my lips. I hadn't talked about my past. But now I came closer and I called up to him.

"You better come down, Fiero, or I'm coming up after you. Those cops will figure out sooner or later that it *was* murder, and someone will take the rap."

"Nobody knows nothing," said Fiero said. "Go about your business."

"All right," I told him grimly. "All right—I'll go about my business." After all, it *had* been my business once.

I reached for the rungs of the high ladder.

FIERO stood there above me and watched. I was looking up as I climbed and I saw the mocking expression on his face change. Suddenly, he, too, started to climb. With that quick, graceful, hand-over-hand motion of the professional high-diver's running ascent, Fiero raced up the high ladder until he reached that tiny platform near the top.

There he waited, and I am sure that he thought that my nerve would crack before I ever reached the top of that slender, swaying framework.

Each rung that passed under me as I made that running ascent was like a milestone; and the thing that kept me going was the simple thought: "*I can come down the same way I went up!*"

I was only ten feet from Fiero when I saw him straighten and tilt his head, there on the little platform.

It hadn't occurred to me that Fiero would attempt a dive. He was in sports shirt and slacks, not in tights; and yet I knew from the position of his body that he was going over. I froze on the ladder, not daring to jump him or to make the ladder sway. Only seconds later he was gone, a curving flash in empty space.

As I gained the platform myself I saw him strike, saw the white flash of spraying water.

It would take many precious minutes to slide and scramble back down that ladder. Fiero would break for the open, run into that cordon of cops outside the show lot.

I closed my eyes for a minute. I got the feel of evening air against my face. I made my brain a blank, for thinking terrified me. One minute—one second—there was the good, solid feel of the platform under me. The next second the white ladder was a spinning blur as I curved in the air. I struck the water sprayed and still I had no time to feel relief. I struck out for the side of the tank and opened my eyes, and there was Fiero, half in and half out of the tank of water.

His fish eyes goggled and his mouth hung open and for the first time since I had left the hospital I laughed. I spit water out of my mouth and said, "So I'm not carny people, huh?" And I grabbed at Fiero and we fell over the rim together and struck the ground.

"Who?" I said to Fiero, and sat on his chest and grabbed a handful of hair on his head and banged his skull to the ground, "who framed Dan Hopping? Who helped Stetter frame him? Was it Gus? Was it LaVerne?"

He said, "Let us up, will you? I know you now. That was Gabriel's dive—"

I said, "All right, I'm Gabriel. You know the whole story. Who put the pinhead on that ride?"

"It was LaVerne," he said. "Stetter made her do it, sure—but it was LaVerne," he said. "Stetter made her do it, sure—but it was LaVerne. I wouldn't have told nobody but you. You was twelve weeks in the hospital and only a damn fool would have dived in that wind that night—"

"Only eleven weeks," I said. "Hopping didn't have insurance, did he?"

"No," said Fiero, "but he has now, I'll bet. Only he hasn't any ride. That would be Stetter's price for covering

him! That Dipperoo will be a gold mine for Stetter—" He stopped and looked up. The detective had come back. A harness cop was with him.

"All right, boys," the detective said. "You can stop playing now. I'm not from headquarters at all. Sorry to fool you folks, but I've just nailed Stetter and Hopping for collusion. I'm from the insurance company that branched out into ride liability insurance this season—"

"Collusion?" I said. "You mean Hopping swapped ownership of that ride to get it under the policy that Stetter holds with your company? He swapped title *after* the accident?"

"You are a bright boy!" the detective said sarcastically. "I gather Hopping was a friend of yours. He'll get a fair trial!"

"So will Stetter," I growled, "but not for collusion. And Hopping can hardly be blamed for sliding out from under what he knew was—murder."

"Murder!" the detective snorted. "Listen, that freak fell out on her head. So what? There was a bar there for her to hang on to. You couldn't get Hopping clemency with that story, and you can't pin murder on Stetter!"

"No?" I said. "Look—how did you blow in here in the first place?"

"There was an accident on one of the other rides. It was the second one since the policy went into effect. I dropped by to check up, and Stetter mistook me for a local cop that he had sent for. I let it ride. I thought maybe that story about the hammer through the window had some kind of a hook-up with the other two accidents. It didn't."

Again I said, "No?" I looked at the sarcastic face and didn't like it. I said, "Did it occur to you that Stetter might have tossed that hammer through the window himself?"

"Why?"

"In order to have a cop on hand, investigating, when Eva was killed. He needed a cop handy to panic Hopping

into signing over that ride."

"Again that presupposes murder," the detective said to me crisply. "In court it becomes necessary to prove murder. You can't!"

"I can't?" I said "Listen— I've a witness to swear that it was Stetter's girl friend, LaVerne, who coaxed Eva into that ride and released the starting lever."

"So what? Putting Eva into that car might be malicious mischief—but hardly murder. Sorry, but your pal Hopping goes to jail. Even though the pinhead wasn't strapped in, there was a bar for her to hang onto—"

"Sure," I said, "but she didn't hang onto it for long."

"That would be ridiculous. Even the limited intelligence of a monkey would know enough to hold tight under such circumstances!"

"Yeah?" I asked him. "Did you ever see a girl on a carnival thrill-ride who didn't scream?"

"No," he admitted. "They always scream."

"Okay," I said. "And Eva screamed. I heard her. We all heard her. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing," he said, puzzled; and then he started to get excited. "Wait a minute," he said. "Come to think of it—"

"You come to think of it kind of late," I said. "You had the same opportunity I had, there at the cookhouse, to see Eva. She screamed three different times during supper and you saw what she did, the same as I saw—"

He had kind of a stricken look on his face. He didn't pay much attention to me. "Of course," he said in growing excitement. "That's it! Stetter knew and LaVerne knew! A woman always screams on one of those rides, and when Eva started to scream, every time—"

"Yeah," I said, and my voice got raspy. "When Eva started to scream, she *always* let go of whatever she held and covered her ears with her hands!"

The Case of Chips Galway

By Charlie Fuller



For three years Sergeant Kirker had been trying to crack the case of the Galway rub-out. And now, he had a chance to trap the ruthless killer. But when Kirker was ready to spring that trap, he had to stick out his own neck for bullet bait.

YOU can sort of excuse a hard-working dick for not anticipating that a three-year-old case will abruptly cut loose and almost kick him into a morgue. That's why Kirker was caught unprepared in his apartment at three A.M., when the dirty egg began to hatch.

He stood confronting a little guy who huddled in an overstuffed chair,

and he tilted his head back and laughed sarcastically.

"You're fresh out of stir, Hymie Sneeters—about four days—"

"Three, sarge."

"All right, three. So you come running to the dick who put you there, wanting to give him a tip, huh? But first you take a sock at him. Come clean, now!"

"Jeez, I—" Sneeters began. Then an idea seemed to hit him. He plunged one hand into a side pocket and fished out a clipping. "There," he chattered, "it's about that."

Kirker took it. And if his fingers trembled slightly that was quite to be expected. He recognized it as the lead item appearing two days ago in a column of the *Morning Times*. It bore a boxed head over a by-line and he knew it by heart, but his gray eyes flashed over it again, re-reading:

OBSERVED

by Karl Cass

Warning—to a Killer!

Some readers will perhaps recall that just three years ago today "Chips" Galway, Brixton's once eminent purveyor of chances—gambler, to you—was found in his apartment permanently punctured by some .45 caliber lead dealt by the hand of a person or persons unknown—and still unknown.

Today your reporter was tipped off that Detective Sergeant Wm. Kirker continues his bulldog grip on the case, unofficially, but does not expect to make an immediate arrest.

Has Sergeant Kirker's present reticence anything to do with the fact that following the slaying, according to our files, he promised for three consecutive days to make an "arrest within twenty-four hours"?

We'll bet a three-year-old hat that the killer is shaking in his boots!

A swift change had come over Kirker. Anticipation fired his gray eyes with hope. He bent forward slightly, muscles tensing. When he spoke there was unconcealed tautness in his voice, and his words were spaced and sharp as the pickets of an iron fence.

"What do you know about this?" he said.

SNEETERS shrank deep into the chair, seeming to take the words as direct accusation. But neither he nor anyone else could know Kirker's secret: that patient work had narrowed down the suspects to only those men possessing a combined motive, opportunity, and lack of alibi; and, too, without a single clue pointing directly toward them—for there were

no clues. Yet while this was beyond Sneeters, evidently he was in a tight spot and knew it. His tongue slid out and moistened dry lips.

"Answer me!" barked Kirker, and Sneeters jumped.

"I-I—" he stuttered, "I know who done it."

Kirker's left hand shot forward, gripped shoddy suit lapels, dragged the ex-con half out of the chair.

"You're lying!"

"No, sarge," Sneeters whined. Then in a rush of words he explained: "That's why I slugged at you out front. The guy's gunnin' fer me. I think he was follerin' me here in the fog. I thought you was him."

"Who?"

Sneeters gulped, seeming to swallow some of his fright. A wily look began to creep into his eyes.

"Who killed Galway?" Kirker demanded, giving his prisoner a shake. Sneeters wagged his head. "Nix," he said. "You can give me the goldfish, or slough me back in stir, but I ain't gonna peep unless you make a deal. You're a square copper."

Kirker changed tactics, released his grip and Sneeters sagged back in the chair. Mentally, Kirker cursed his own soft-heartedness which always prevented him from slamming crooks around. But things were beginning to add up, long-puzzling things. A report of a "little man" seen in the neighborhood just before the Galway kill. And then Sneeters' almost complacent attitude over a three-year larceny sentence shortly after the murder.

"You did your time," Kirker guessed, "and came back here figuring you had a good thing. Then you tried to put the squeeze on the killer. That it?"

Sneeters' slack jaw confirmed the astute reasoning of his captor.

"And," Kirker went on, rapidly piecing together the picture, "instead of paying off, the killer tried to gun you out so you came running to me. But murder is murder. So now, be-

sides being accessory after the fact, you're open for an extortion—"

"Look," blurted Sneeters, apprehension growing in his beady eyes. "Lay off that. I'm State's witness, see? Sure I was at Galway's joint the night he got bumped. Just as I was leavin' I seen this big guy. So I ducked. He opens Galway's door an' pours his heat, an' beats it with me right behind him, but—"

"Who was it?" cut in Kirker impatiently.

"How about—" Sneeters stopped short with almost a sob. Abruptly his pallid face became ashen in hue. His body stiffened. His eyes had darted past his questioner.

Kirker, instantly alert, whirled. One hand went streaking for his police positive. The door had whipped inward on silent hinges to reveal a big man—fully masked. He raised his arm.

Kirker would not have believed so much could be crowded into an instant of time—so many thoughts, so much action. In the right hand of the man was a blued automatic. If its bullet sped to its mark—and its mark was Kirker, himself—the Galway case might indeed be marked closed, for Sneeters then would get the next bullet. This double murder would eliminate the murderer's sole threat of disaster; eliminate it in the identical manner in which Chips Galway had so successfully been slain.

THAT this was the murderer and a poisonously dangerous foe, Kirker felt by instinct. Also he realized too late that this bold act fully justified the little ex-con's suspicions regarding his being followed. And that Sneeters realized it, too, was evident from a strangled cry—terror-laden—which welled from his throat. Barring a miracle the little man, weaponless, now must know he was doomed.

Another corner of Kirker's brain spurted an instantaneous thought. The mask must surely mean that the face behind it was well-known; that its owner dared take no chances, even

while risking all in such a frontal attack. Perhaps, too, the big man's failure to voice a single word was equally significant.

All this—and much more—flashed across Kirker's mind while steely muscles whirled him around in a pivoting motion.

"Duck!" he shouted at Sneeters.

Then the gun in the doorway was blasting. Kirker tried to swerve. He gasped as the first slug tore at his ribs. The lead struck at a point just below fingers which were dragging out the positive. Impact of the big slug was tremendous. It threw him sidewise, destroying balance. He twisted, fighting to regain control. Another bullet seared across one shoulder. It spun him half around. His involuntary wince upset him. He fell. Imagination suggested someone was bearing down with a red-hot poker on his shoulder, and the pain in his left side grew terrific.

"No! No!" Sneeters was screaming.

Two more shots sounded. Then the thud of his body on the rug brought a wave of pity surging through Kirker's heart. After all, it was cold-blooded murder. He himself, had fallen with his head behind the chair, thus cutting off the view. His body faced the door. His coat gaped open and there, attached to his belt, could be seen a leather case with a protruding, glassy eye. His left hand moved imperceptibly on this case, but the right arm was pinned beneath his pain-wracked body.

He lay breathlessly quiet, teeth clenched. What else could be done? Before a move could get his head clear of the chair so as even to see a target for his half-drawn gun, there would come a rain of bullets.

Thus it was, only after hearing the voices of aroused tenants, that he dared to move, and then only with difficulty.

But if his overnight hospitalization—which doctors insisted on—proved irksome, it at least rested him while he grimly used the phone to start a

trap closing; a trap made necessary by the murder of Sneeters before he could name the killer.

Mid-afternoon was approaching when Kirker demanded his pants with such gusto and determination that he got them. Fifteen minutes later he entered headquarters, the pain of a nicked rib and a shoulder crease eclipsed by a greater urge driving him hopefully toward the climax to a three-year task—the trapping of a ruthless killer.

In the main corridor as he passed the press room, a sharp voice, calling his name, halted him. A large, flashily dressed man ambled out.

"Why drag me down here?" he demanded. "Going to throw me in the can just because I ribbed you? You had it coming."

"I know," Kirker admitted grimly, "but you're all wet, Cass. I *am* promising a pinch in the Galway case. Stick *that* in your column."

KARL CASS raised one eyebrow, mockingly. Although in the late forties, he appeared youthful. Deep in his dark eyes there gleamed the cynicism of most newsmen.

"Prove it," he invited.

"Come on."

Kirker knocked on Commissioner Norbert's door. A deep voice bade them enter. Inwardly, Kirker breathed easier at sight of two big men seated opposite his tough old chief. He wondered on what pretext Norbert had drawn these suspects here but dismissed it as a quail smote him. Each passing moment saw his own neck sticking out farther and farther. It was tempting the ax, yet things now were too far gone to turn back. And the bombshell he was about to toss—Well, the commissioner was due for a jolt.

"Glad that rat didn't get you last night, sergeant," Norbert boomed, swinging a pair of piercing blue eyes on Kirker. "We'll nail him if it takes ten years."

"I'll have him within twenty-four hours, sir," Kirker confided.

Cass, to one side, smoothed his black hair unmarred by gray, and snickered audibly. "Your needle's in a groove, sergeant."

Kirker swung toward him angrily. "This time—" He checked himself, threw open his coat, and tossed his bombshell. "See this," he snapped, ramming a finger at a lens jutting from the small leather case on his belt. "It's a noiseless shutter camera, and I can take shots without removing it from the case. Last night I got one of the murderer!"

His audience sat tense in stunned silence for a moment. Even Norbert, partly primed by Kirker's phone call, seemed flabbergasted.

"What?" he bellowed.

Kirker turned to him. "I'm sorry, sir," he apologized. "I let Cass get under my hide. I didn't mean to spill this—" He stopped and looked at Norbert's visitors as if regretfully remembering their presence.

Norbert, recovering poise, waved an imperious hand and took up the slack. "I'm sure Mr. Elston and Mr. McGirt can be persuaded to keep quiet. Isn't that correct?" he addressed them.

Gregory Elston, the nearer, nodded agreement. Nevertheless he shifted uneasily and the movement showed his bulk was chiefly muscle—good muscle at fifty odd years. And brains went with that brawn, judging from his high forehead and sharp eyes. He looked like "big business." Actually he controlled Brixton's vice and gambling, had men who went to jail for him. Always his own skirts were clean—legally.

McGirt, on the other hand, by his very boldness had been caught in crookery and disbarred, whereupon he'd turned his talents to politics. Enemies called him "Dirty" McGirt. If the democrats wanted John Doe elected, they saw McGirt. But if the republicans hiked the ante, then John Doe lost. Close-set eyes indicated

trickiness. Wide shoulders shrugged his affirmation to Norbert's question and the move prefaced a shrewd remark.

"Wasn't that man *masked*?" he inquired in his peculiarly harsh voice.

"That's right," observed Elston, suddenly removing rimless bifocals and beginning to polish them. "The papers said so."

"I was wondering," Cass put in, "when someone was going to think of that. It seems, sarge, you're really out on a limb."

"Just wait!" Kirker snapped. "Everyone's seen these army photographs taken through clouds or fog with infra-red rays."

"Nuts," scoffed McGirt. "A mask is opaque."

"So is steel!"

"And so what?" said Cass.

KIRKER prodded him. "Why don't you read something other than your own column? Infra-red is a back number. Science recently proved that solar radiations which are shorter than X- or gamma-rays—vibrations of the sixty-second octave, they call 'em—will penetrate *four feet of steel*!"

"Wasn't there an article in some magazine?" murmured Elston. "I believe they put film under steel plates. But a special developer was used and—"

"Here's some of it," Kirker announced. He produced a bottle, sparkling with bright green liquid.

"I'm from Missouri," Cass declared.

Kirker glanced at Norbert, who, though evidently puzzled at this turn of events, was maintaining silence, perhaps confident matters would soon clarify.

"Mr. Commissioner—may I demonstrate?" Receiving permission, Kirker again addressed the columnist. "Since you suspect trickery, how about sending Elston's chauffeur to any drug store you name for some fresh film?"

"Agreed."

Five minutes later the man brought it and was dismissed. Kirker then handed his miniature camera to Cass, saying, "Look it over—and load her up." Then he added, "Anyone care to mask himself?" He paused, and getting no answer, suggested, "Well, let's use this."

He moved a little brass bust of George Washington, serving as a paperweight, to one end of Norbert's desk. At the other he mounted the now loaded camera atop two books and centered it, then began to drape a handkerchief before the lens.

Significantly, perhaps, Elston and McGirt both rose and moved out of range of the lens. The latter approached Kirker and said:

"That cloth looks mighty thin."

Cass closed in, challenging, "Yes, and let someone else take the picture."

"Sure," Kirker rapped. "How about you? And we'll do away with the handkerchief." He picked up a heavy blotter and shoved it in front of the bust. "Go ahead—shoot!"

Cass' dark eyes stared into the view finder, no doubt unaware he was being used as a tool. He pushed the shutter release.

"Now," said Kirker, "take out the film. Elston, will you call your man again? . . . Here," he added when the chauffeur appeared, "take this to some photo-finisher. Tell him to develop it in this green stuff—exactly four minutes and twenty seconds at seventy degrees. And say it's a police job and get us a wet print in a hurry."

Within twenty minutes the flunky handed over an envelope. Kirker opened it and tossed a damp print on the desk. Everyone, the commissioner included, crowded close to stare down at it. By some miracle, Kirker's fingers seemed to have transformed into thin celuloid what certainly was a heavy blotter. And there, easily recognizable though seen through printed matter, was Washington.

McGirt picked up the blotter, tested thickness. His harsh voice was soft. "It—it's screwy!"

Elston and the columnist were silent.

Norbert, now seeming fully convinced that Kirker wasn't pulling some sort of flim-flam, suddenly demanded, "Where's that film—from last night?"

It was the question for which Kirker had been angling, and he answered promptly: "At my apartment."

WHILE not strict truth, he consoled himself for such misstatement with the grim thought that he was baiting a cold-blooded murderer who'd gone three long years without punishment.

Kirker added, "You see, sir, I thought the killer might have seen me take the picture and might somehow or another get at my camera at the hospital. So I hid the film."

"I'll send and get it," Norbert cried. "We must develop it immediately."

Kirker shook his head. "Sorry. You've forgotten the special developer. I was so anxious to show Cass, here, that I wasn't a dumb cop, that I made this demonstration—used my last developer. I'll have to mix some tonight, and after it ages a few hours I'll develop in my own darkroom. You'll have a print first thing in the morning."

It was scarcely fifteen minutes later when Kirker entered a shop near Brixton's waterfront and there remained for forty minutes, following a dicker he made for some wax—in a very special form. Later still, after lingering over steak and French fries, he returned to the shop and got a package—a sizable one which he placed beside another purchase made in the meantime—a big, rubber beach-ball. Both items would build a trap; a trap wherein he told himself he would put his face for bait and hope to catch a killer.

Darkness had long since fallen and Kirker with his bundles approached his apartment warily. There was no discounting the fact he'd placed himself in grave jeopardy. On the other

hand he credited the killer with having brains and ability to use them. So it seemed probable the man would suspect a trap, would make no attack until his suspicions were lulled. However, Kirker did not relax vigilance.

There was a small parcel propped against his door. He picked it up. Then, after entering and placing the bundles in his bedroom, he returned to the living room and undid the wrappings of this little package. Perhaps it was the ease with which the string came off that warned him. Certainly the contents appeared innocent enough. For inside the paper was a six ounce bottle, full of brownish liquid and bearing a label inscribed: *Take two tablespoonfuls one hour before retiring.*

He recalled the doctor at the hospital saying something about sending over a sedative. He wet a fingertip with the stuff, tasted it. His expression did not change, but his tingling tongue told him this bottle held almost pure chloral hydrate—the active ingredient of a Mickey Finn. His mind conjured a picture of a big man slipping through the hall, seeing an opportunity, seizing it. To Kirker it seemed a good omen, forerunner of some action.

He carelessly put down the bottle, aware of undrawn shades affording a view to any interested outsider. Crossing the room, he opened a tight-fitting door and entered a small room smelling of hypo and developer; a room of neatly regimented trays and film files.

A shelf yielded a bottle, exact duplicate of that outside. He slapped on a label, ran water from a convenient tap. Then, with a medicine dropper, he squirted in four drops of a dark solution. Immediately the water became turbid, murky. He corked and shook the bottle, and pocketed it. Superficially it would pass for the other.

He ignored the mixing of any developer and went out, picked up his "medicine" and headed for the kitchenette.

HERE, after adroitly swapping bottles en route, he stood under a bright light near the window and gulped his tasteless substitute, making a wry face over it. Thereupon, dousing all other lights as he went along, he entered the bathroom.

But he slipped back into his bed chamber and worked swiftly, in darkness, except for indirect illumination from the bathroom. Finally he reached into a side pocket, withdrew a green roll of film. After standing it conspicuously under a table lamp at the foot of his bed, he moved to throw wide the bedroom window.

Well aware that if things went wrong he would become victim instead of victor, he shrugged away the thought. It had been impossible to confide his risky plan to Norbert, for the commissioner would have vetoed it. Now it was sink or swim—alone.

Midnight was near when he turned from the window, switched on the light over the film, and settled himself to await action.

Suppose his pincer plan itself failed?

But how could it, for the murderer *must* come—was *in* the pincers. One jaw was the threatened development of the film. The other jaw was a fear that any gunman sent to get it might appropriate it and thereby gain a powerful weapon over his employer; or worse yet, he might bungle the job. To crown all and add pressure on the jaws, the murderer dared bring no reinforcements, dared not reveal his identity. Blackmail would be the penalty, an obvious point against which he guarded.

Thus speculating, Kirker felt a tingle pricking his nerves. From great distance, over the rooftops floated the moaning wail of a liner's siren. Immediately, in sharp contrast, came the hoarse bellow of a freighter—powerful, dismal, portentous.

Echoes barely died when there was a movement at the window—a flicker so mercurial that you could doubt your eyesight.

Time crawled on—and on. Once more the freighter bellowed—and once more silence settled ominously.

Again came the movement. A masked head showed. And through slitted gray eyes Kirker noticed a new angle. A clever idea it was. Instead of eyeholes, dark glass inserts in the mask tossed back rays of light. Were they lenses, similar to spectacles, or only shields?

Evidently the suspicious eyes behind them now were studying the room; especially the bed whereon the bathrobe-clad figure lay propped by pillows. A magazine at one side was held slackly while the head lolled forward as though slumber had overtaken weary eyes—drug-weary eyes.

Quickly the masked face withdrew, only to pop back as if bent on spying out some telltale movement in the sleeper. Presently the big man flowed through the window as stealthily as a tiger through a canebrake. Light glinted on an automatic gripped in the right hand. A black suit melted with the shadows. And a dark felt hat, well pulled down, hid his hair.

A forward glide carried him to the foot of the bed. He flipped a glance over the right shoulder as if to assure himself the film hadn't vanished. His gun hand lifted, aimed his weapon. Muscles in the trigger finger ridged, hardened. He hesitated, leaned yet closer to his target, gun arm stretching far out as though to insure deadly accuracy tonight—pointblank.

Two quick shots bit out. The body on the bed settled with a long drawn sigh, lay motionless.

The man whirled, scooped the film into a pocket.

But while Kirker's figure on the bed lay cold and stiff, Kirker himself proved quite alive and active. He'd stepped from the bathroom. He trained his service positive on his visitor.

"Stop!" he commanded.

It brought the other swinging round to a halt like a wind-slammed door. His automatic was pointed floorward.

The hidden face jerked toward the bed and back.

"Trapped," Kirker said. "Better drop that gun."

AN OMINOUS silence ensued. Tension mounted. Suddenly the man tossed aside the gun, sagged back against the table, a quivering, blubbing heap. Sobs rocked him. Wide shoulders trembled. This change, this breakdown was astonishing in one who but a moment before had been so deadly.

Someone began to hammer on the outer door.

The intruder clutched both hands over his left breast, and his sobs gave way to breath that rattled in his throat—long, dry rasps. His knees seemed to go all rubbery.

"Heart," he husked, voice unrecognizable. "Guess—it's best—way out."

Kirker stepped closer, hand extending, but caution asserted itself, bade him hesitate. He had anticipated desperate resistance, perhaps a fierce attack. But this was wholly unforeseen—the collapse of an overburdened heart.

The victim was weaving unsteadily. His hands dropped limply to his sides. He tottered forward, on the verge of pitching on his face.

Quick sympathy forced Kirker a step closer, left hand outstretched—a purely humane gesture as unthought about as breathing.

Instantly the other acted. A long stride restored his balance. His right foot drove through, lashing upward, broadside. It caught Kirker's wrist, spun away his weapon. The move was shrewd, perfectly timed. The tricky brain had cannily perceived, then taken advantage of Kirker's natural sympathy, had drawn him half off guard. Yet not fully.

A stubby revolver flashed into the big man's hand, but Kirker leaped. He grasped the gun wrist in a desperate grip. His right hand, numb with pain, followed to the wrist immediately and he twisted. Fingers clawed

his face. They dug at eyes, nose, mouth. He threw his head back and muscles of his arms and wrists bulged as he screwed the gun hand around. The muzzle turned away from him and bent up, up . . .

A half groan, half sob, and the gun hand yielded. The revolver thudded on the rug. And its owner went completely berserk. All twisting strength and fury, he drove a cruel, grinding blow into Kirker's wounded side. Kirker gasped with pain but slammed a fist against the masked face.

He had been in several tough fights in his career, but this onslaught seemed inspired by a sort of maniacal fury. This was no refereed encounter. The assailant gouged and slugged, used feet and knees, kept up a vicious, raging attack. The problem of defense alone made Kirker forego an immediate counter-attack.

Through it all came sounds to punctuate the battle; shifting feet that rustled on the rug; lungs that pumped air audibly. In the hall a woman screamed.

The big man dove in a desperate lunge for the revolver. Kirker's left was cocked. He threw it, a curving, roundhouse hook. Squarely on the mask it landed—where the jaw should be. He crossed a right that made nerves scream, sent fire racing up his arm. His opponent staggered, reeled drunkenly. This time his rubbery knees were not phony. He caromed off a chair and collapsed.

Kirker straightened up. His left hand began to massage knuckles, wrist, a right arm that felt as if it were clamped within a saw-tooth vise. A terrific impact rattled the window-panes.

IN A moment, to Kirker's surprise, the old man himself appeared, trailed by several husky assistants, one brushing splinters from a shoulder.

"I had a hunch you were up to—" Norbert stopped, and his keen eyes whipped to the bed.

TSD

"A dummy!" he exclaimed.

Kirker, recovering naturally bouyant spirits, had to grin.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I knew a killer was coming—one who shoots on sight. He was bound to suspect a trap. So I had to make it good." He watched the lean commissioner bend forward, roll the wax figure aside.

"What in hell is this?" Norbert dragged forth the deflated beach-ball.

"A convincer. I let out half the air and stuck it behind my dummy. Two shots and it sighed and eased the body down so slick I had to pinch myself!"

"Well," admitted Norbert, "it sure convinced that bird. Who is he?"

The big man, groaning, had begun to stir. One of the dicks, hooking fingers under the man's armpits, hauled him into a chair, then ripped off the soggy mask.

"Jumpin' Jupiter! Cass!"

Cass's eyelids lifted. He stared around dazedly and shook his head. "Where—what—" he muttered.

"So!" said Norbert. "So!" And the way he said it meant plenty. But swift anxiety clouded his blue eyes. "The film—is it safe?"

Cass had craftily produced something from a pocket. Before the nearer dick could stop him he ripped its seal, unrolled a strip of celluloid.

"This?" he asked sardonically. "Why it's nothing but some unexposed film, and—" he stared straight at Kirker—"and I think it's ruined."

"Right," Kirker agreed. "On both counts."

Norbert looked baffled. Cass shifted uneasily, dark eyes growing apprehensive.

"Norbert!" he stormed, "if this fool has faked photogra—"

"Cass!" interrupted Kirker. "It was all faked—"

"Wait a minute," Norbert interrupted. "Not that at my office?"

Kirker laughed heartily. "Mr. Commissioner, have you ever forgotten to wind your film—made a double exposure? I see you have. Well, I

snapped my noiseless shutter as soon as I set up my camera. That shot the bust. Then Cass photographed the blotter. Of course both objects appeared on the print."

"I suppose that green stuff—"

"Regular developer—colored with aniline dye."

Cass seemed relieved, but Kirker turned on him.

"First, you tried in your column to rib me off the Galway case. Then, this afternoon, you overlooked an amazingly simple point. I admitted to everyone that I was faking."

"You mean that?" cried Norbert.

"Yes," Kirker explained. "Didn't I say that the picture-taking rays would even penetrate steel? It's true. But the exposure takes months. If the penetration of solids were instantaneous, then what could be used for a film container—or for a shutter?"

"By golly!" Norbert chuckled, "I never thought of that." His face grew sober as perhaps he did think that now, lacking photographic proof, a case against the newsman seemed doubtful.

Evidently Cass also was considering the point. He said acidly, "Norbert—ask Kirker if it's a crime to plug a dummy?"

"Another slip!" rapped Kirker. "That's your automatic and—"

Cass catapulted out of the chair and toward the window. Kirker neatly tripped him. Cass's head, as he plunged forward, slammed against a radiator with sickening impact. Kirker stooped, rolled him over.

"Cass knew what was coming. His automatic will match the slugs from Sneeters' body. And today ballistics told me that the same gun killed Galway. So after three years, sir, we've cracked the case."

Relief surged across Norbert's face.

"Nice work, lieutenant," he began.

Kirker looked around, eyes puzzled.

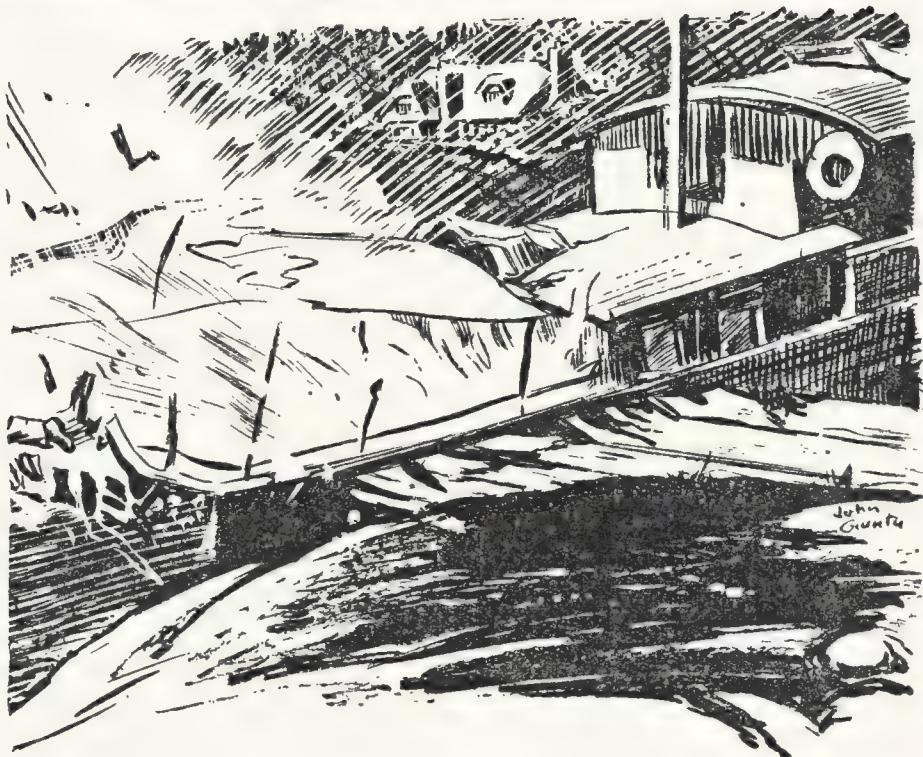
Norbert smiled. "I'm talking to you—ex-Sergeant Kirker."

Curse of the



Blood was on the moon that night when Parole Officer Kerrigan drove off with a trusted prisoner. For, because of his faith in one man, Kerrigan was catapulted into a maze of mystery and murder that demanded his life as an entrance fee.

Bleeding Stone



Gripping Novelette *By Norman A. Daniels*

CHAPTER I

NO SURRENDER

TERRY KERRIGAN, parole officer of the big State Prison, slid a gun into a hip holster, picked up a pair of handcuffs and put on his hat.

Malloy, assistant keeper, said, "Hey, Kerrigan, I thought you trusted this guy Rossiter. Why the gun and cuffs?"

Kerrigan turned in the doorway and smiled. "Rossiter is paroled as of today. There's a wanted order for him and he's going to the city for another trial. I'm going along to deliver him and, incidentally, try to arrange a little justice."

"I don't get it," Malloy said.

"Rossiter did a six-year stretch. He was caught red-handed, but happened to be just a stooge for the mob. Rossiter learned a lot up here. He's willing to face his medicine on another charge, but he knows something and wants to bargain for a lighter stretch. I'm inclined to help him."

Malloy shook his head. "Rossiter used to run with the old mobs, Kerrigan. That means he was bad all through. Six years in stir doesn't change those rats much."

Kerrigan closed the door hard. Malloy was like all the others here—never conceding that a convict might become a real man. Someone useful to society. Kerrigan went to the front office and found the paroled convict waiting.

ROSSITER was still young, and hard work in prison hadn't hurt him any. He shook hands with Kerrigan. "You don't know how much this means to me, Mr. Kerrigan. The way you took an interest in me, I mean. If you hadn't been here, they'd just have shipped me back for another trial and I'd return here in a couple of days for another long stretch."

"Yes—I know." Kerrigan regarded the young man with some doubt. "I've never made a mistake yet, Rossiter, about any man in the prison. I could have let a regular police detail take you back to the city, but I've faith in you. I wanted to go along and see that you got a break. You are quite certain the information you possess is big enough to make the district attorney dicker?"

"He'd be willing to suggest a suspended sentence," said Rossiter, grinning. "I know what I'm talking about, sir. It's not that—I want to turn canary. What I'll have to say won't put anyone in prison or the chair because every man connected with the business is dead. Every one died by police bullets, so you see that helped to teach me a lesson, too."

"All right," Kerrigan said. "Let's get started. I'm not even putting cuffs on you, Rossiter. If you should make a break for it, things wouldn't only go bad for you, but for me, too."

"You don't have to worry," Rossiter smiled. "If I didn't behave, I'd be the lowest rat this prison ever took in. If it weren't for you, I'd still have four years more to serve before any parole board would listen."

"Remember that, then," Kerrigan said. "Here—get into my car."

They rolled along the highway at a modest speed. Rossiter kept looking around, interested as only a man who'd been inside for six years could be.

"There isn't much traffic," he said, "and you sure are a careful driver, Mr. Kerrigan. Me—I used to burn these roads up."

"So did I," Kerrigan laughed. "It

happens that right now we're in a war. Gas and rubber are precious. That's why there are so few cars rolling and why I'm taking it easy."

"Oh," Rossiter nodded. "Funny how the war doesn't mean much when you're behind bars. But it's going to mean plenty to me, sir. I learned a trade up there and I learned it good. With your help, I'll get a job in defense work."

"Excellent," Kerrigan said. "Now just sit back and relax."

Rossiter did. Forty miles ticked off and his face was still aglow as he studied billboards, watched a streamliner whiz past, saw army trucks. Then Kerrigan turned into a large gasoline station.

"You can stretch your legs here," he said. "Got to fill up. Stations in town haven't much gas and this station happens to give prison cars a priority."

Rossiter got out and walked around a bit. Finally he entered the station itself. Kerrigan paid little attention to him. He was certain this man had been remade. Kerrigan signed a tab for the gasoline and watched as the service man checked his oil and water.

Suddenly, there was a shout from inside and then a shot. An elderly man, employed by the service station, staggered out, took a few more steps and pitched forward on his face.

Kerrigan was beside him in a moment. "What happened?"

"Guy—walked out of wash room. Stuck me up. Tried to rob the register and then—shot me."

Kerrigan's face was an impassive mask. He whisked a heavy pistol out of its holster, fanned back the trigger and stepped into the station.

"Rossiter," he called out, "you can't get away. Open the door, toss out your gun and come out with your hands in the air. It's that—or I'll riddle the door."

Kerrigan's reply was a single shot. The bullet smashed through the panels, missed by a mile, but Kerrigan got

out of range in case there were more slugs. He leveled his pistol.

"Rossiter, this is your last chance," he warned.

A DERISIVE, gibbering laugh answered. Kerrigan fired two shots. There were a few seconds of silence and then a single shot. It didn't come from Kerrigan's gun and no slug crashed through the door. An instant later Kerrigan heard a thump inside the wash room.

He moved toward it carefully, tried the knob and found the door locked. He drew back and attacked the panels. It took him four or five minutes to batter the door down, and then it refused to open all the way. Something was pressed against it. Kerrigan forced the door back, wormed his way into the tiny room and gave a long sigh of resignation.

Rossiter was dead. A self-inflicted bullet hole in the side of his head seemed to be the cause, although there was a second wound through the shoulder. Rossiter still gripped a cheap nickel-plated thirty-eight revolver.

A short time after Kerrigan put through a phone call, he heard an ambulance siren as the car drove up to the gas station.

A doctor squeezed in, made a quick examination of Rossiter and shrugged. "He's dead—and so's the man outside."

"You mean," Kerrigan asked, "the station attendant?"

"Got it just below the heart. Smashed an important blood vessel and he bled to death."

Sometime later Kerrigan sat in the gas station and listened to a captain of homicide from the city, a State Police lieutenant and the deputy warden of the prison.

The deputy warden said, "This is your responsibility, Kerrigan. You testified Rossiter was ready to become a useful citizen. Now it seems he gave you quite a line. That business about dickering with the D. A., for instance,

to get a suspended sentence on this other charge against him. That was just cooked up so he'd have a chance to make a break for it."

"Yes," the detective captain put in, "and one of Rossiter's old pals knew how all the prison cars stopped at this gas station to refuel. They hid a gun in the wash room, and Rossiter just walked in, tried to stick up the station for cash to make a comfortable getaway and then—when you had him cornered—he couldn't take it. Personally, I think you're a plain sucker, Kerrigan."

"You and your psychology," the deputy warden grunted. "Nonsense. I'm afraid you're all done."

"I'm resigning now," Kerrigan said softly. "I need all the time there is to find out what really happened here. No matter what the evidence shows, I maintain Rossiter is innocent. I don't even think he committed suicide."

That drew some rather sarcastic laughter. Kerrigan walked out, climbed into his car and drove away. But a mile down the road he stopped, frowned and turned back. The others had left the station. Kerrigan went in, walked straight to the wash room and examined a window at the rear of it. The window was closed, but not locked. Outside, he found a few scraped marks on the cement just below the window which, so far as evidence was concerned, meant nothing. He went back to his car and drove straight to the prison.

There he consulted various records, made notes and finally wrote his resignation. He cleaned out the desk, marched to his car and went away.

CHAPTER II

DRUID VICTIM

TWO days had elapsed since young Rossiter died in the wash room. It was dusk and Terry Kerrigan shut off the engine of the small speed boat he'd hired.

Directly ahead of him was an island. He wanted to reach it without being detected and therefore had, first of all, gone far out to sea before circling to come in. There was a big house on the island, owned by a man named Arch Whitten, who had several guests living there at the moment. All this, Kerrigan had discovered by some discreet investigating.

One of these guests was named Benson, but Kerrigan had an idea he also had another name. One much more familiar to police and prison officials. Therefore, Kerrigan used a pair of oars, reached the shore and pulled the boat up as far as possible.

It was almost dark as he moved along a narrow trail through the heavy forest growth. Kerrigan heard voices and promptly ducked to one side. Five people came along the trail. In the lead was a man of medium build, talking and gesturing eagerly.

Kerrigan recognized him as Arch Whitten, who owned the island. Beside Whitten was a burlier man with an ugly scar running part way across his throat. This was Benson, although Kerrigan knew him much better as Deek Chandler, ex-occupant of a cell at the prison. Deek was a smooth article, fully capable of tricking even a smart man like Whitten into believing in him.

Behind these two, and walking alone, was a third man. Kerrigan knew him, too. He'd seen Attorney Cotter in court, and when he came to visit clients who were in prison. The rest of the party was made up of a young man and a very pretty girl. They held hands as they walked, and, with a grin, the young man pulled the girl off the trail and they sat down on an overturned tree trunk.

Kerrigan slipped past them, took up the trail of the others and crouched behind a bush as the three men stopped. Whitten pointed at a huge, weather-beaten rock. It seemed to have been carved by hand and was

certainly no part of this island's stone formations.

Somehow, the great piece of stone looked foreboding, and even the area surrounding it had a strange look to it. Kerrigan could hear Whitten's voice very plainly.

"There," he said, "it stands. Originally, the Druids in England used it as a sacrificial altar. In the light of a full moon they used to dispatch their victims on it."

Attorney Cotter said, "The museums are full of these things. Almost all tribes made sacrifices and used stone altars."

"I admit that," Whitten said somewhat sharply, "but a Druid altar differs. The Druids were, perhaps, the strangest cult that ever existed. They did not believe in death for their priests. Instead, the souls of these priests entered the stone altar at which they worshiped—like the one you see right here."

"Nonsense," Cotter said and turned on his heel. He walked rapidly away.

Benson, alias Deek Chandler, spoke then. "I'm not doubting you, Mr. Whitten. Yet you're not scaring me either. In fact, I think I'll stay out here awhile until the moon comes up. It's full tonight. Who knows, I might find a few Druid playmates to entertain me."

"No," Whitten said sharply. "You can't do that. It's dangerous, I tell you. I've studied these things, and wild as they seem—things do happen. I won't permit you to stay here alone."

"I'd like to see you stop me," Benson snapped. Then he changed his tone quickly. "Sorry, but you see a thing like this offers a sort of a challenge. I'm going to stay and prove that no Druid priests come swarming out of that rock. Just give me a couple of hours, Mr. Whitten. I like it out here—quiet, peaceful."

Whitten shrugged. "All right. After all, you are my guest and I should be gracious about this even though I know it is dangerous. See you later, then."

WHITTEN strolled back along the path and disappeared. Terry Kerrigan slowly drew his gun and wriggled closer to the altar. Benson ground a cigarette against it, turned on his heel and disappeared in the brush.

Kerrigan swore softly. He should have grabbed Benson when he was busy with Whitten and Cotter. For half an hour, Kerrigan searched the brush without finding a trace of the ex-convict. He wondered if, perhaps, even Benson had become frightened out here alone. There was a full moon that threw a weird light over the rock. Even Kerrigan shivered and knew of a lot more places he'd rather be.

Perhaps Benson had returned to the house by now. Kerrigan decided to go there, show himself and make explanations. If Benson was there—good. He'd get it over with fast. Otherwise, he'd tell Whitten just what kind of a man he had as a guest and merely wait until Benson returned.

Kerrigan had to skirt the stone altar on his way to the trail. Something moved on the side of that big rock. Moved like a lazy serpent. Kerrigan gulped and felt like running. He grimly approached the stone altar until he saw what caused that strange ribbon on its side. It was a stream of blood.

He stepped back, looked up and saw a man's arm lying limply against the curved surface of the high stone. Kerrigan found a crevice, hooked his fingers into it and drew himself up. In a couple of minutes he was on top of the gruesome stone. There, Kerrigan slowly wilted into a sitting position and knew that his last method of absolving himself was gone.

Benson, alias Deek Chandler, stared up at the moon with eyes that saw none of its eerie beauty. There was a big knife plunged hilt deep in his breast and it had been apparently twisted to release more blood.

Kerrigan slid to the ground and started running. He was close to the

house when he heard someone coming through the brush. He stopped, and when the man appeared, Kerrigan seized his arm. It was Attorney Cotter.

"Who the devil are you?" Cotter stared.

"Never mind that now. There's been a murder. Man knifed to death on top of the Druid altar. Where is Whitten and the others?"

"In the house, I suppose. But—murder! Murder on that rock? Are you sure?"

"I'll let you go look for yourself in a moment," Kerrigan said. "Right now, take me into the house."

A few moments later Kerrigan faced Whitten, Cotter and the two young people. They were introduced as Mary Lee, cousin of Arch Whitten, and Billy Keith, her fiancé.

Kerrigan identified himself and told them what had happened. "I think," he added, "that Benson was a murderer himself, but that doesn't make the man who just killed him any the less criminal. Benson must have been killed sometime during the last half hour. Cotter was outside. Were the rest of you here—in the house?"

"I was alone," Whitten said stonily, "except for McGuire. He's the caretaker who stays on the island the year around. I don't know where Cotter nor Mary nor young Keith were."

"Mary and I just took a walk along the beach," Keith said, somewhat heatedly.

"All right," Kerrigan said. "We'll go into alibis later. Right now, we'd better do something about Benson. Whitten, do you mind?"

Whitten swallowed with some difficulty. "Yes—I do. But I'll go along. There are certain things you should know about that rock, Kerrigan—gruesome things."

They left the house and walked side by side along the trail. They needed no more light than that furnished by the moon.

"I DON'T suppose you know anything about Druids," Whitten said. "I'll explain. They existed in England centuries ago and were about the most bloody cult ever known. In the light of a full moon—they called it the sacrificial moon—blood ran pretty fast and deep."

"Well, what's that got to do with what happened to this dead man?" Kerrigan asked.

"I was coming to that. The big altars they used are still in existence, especially around a place in England called Stonehenge. I visited it some years ago, before the war, and I bought one of those stones and had it shipped over here to this island. Thought it might lend atmosphere to the place."

The setting for the horrible picture which Kerrigan saw for the second time was just about perfect. The moon staring down unwinkingly, strange shadows around the Druid altar, and to top it off, a light fog was coming in slowly.

"Hey—look!" Kerrigan pointed at the rock. "There is fog coming in, but that wisp of smoke I see actually seems to be coming out of the rock itself."

Whitten turned deathly pale. He whirled suddenly. "Run, Kerrigan. Run for your life! Run, I tell you."

Kerrigan ran, not because he was scared, but Whitten was acting strangely and might be trying to get away. There was murder represented in all its gory hues on that rock. Kerrigan finally grabbed Whitten's arm and stopped him.

"Take it easy," he warned. "What was the big idea of that?"

Whitten was shaking under Kerrigan's hard grasp. "You don't understand," he said hollowly. "That wisp of smoke, as you called it, was a ghastly thing. Listen—very carefully. Maybe you'll laugh at me. Benson did—and look at him."

"All right," Kerrigan said tartly. "Start talking."

"The Druids believed in transmi-

gration of souls, and it is said that when they died, their souls entered the altars at which they worshiped and waited until they could come forth and enter another body. That wisp of smoke came directly out of the rock. How could a solid piece of stone give off smoke? It was one of those Druids. He saw us coming and wanted to take possession of one of us. Now laugh—laugh, damn it! Tell me I'm crazy. But don't forget, I talked to the people whose ancestors once worshiped at these altars."

"This man who passed himself off as Benson—" Kerrigan faced Whitten, who seemed to have recovered some of his nerve—"how did you meet him? Why was he on this island?"

Whitten said, "Why—why he was introduced to me some time ago. I invited him here, along with the others. Why do you ask me that?"

"Because Benson is also known to a number of police rogues' galleries as Deek Chandler. He's been out of prison only a short time and there's a wanted notice after his record for jumping parole. That scar on his throat was the result of an attack on him in prison."

"Good—heavens," Whitten gasped. "I didn't know that, of course. It rather explains a few things, but not all. I told Benson—or whatever his real name was—all about this Druid stone. He laughed and kidded me plenty. Said he'd sit on the rock all night, in the light of the sacrificial moon. He'd start a small fire of oak and mistletoe. Those were held in reverence by the Druids. He was laughing at me when I left him beside the rock about an hour ago."

"Let's go to the house," Kerrigan suggested. "And get this, Mr. Whitten, I don't believe in ghosts, transmigration of souls or anything else concerned with Druids or ghosts. That wisp of smoke we saw was probably fog. You said something about Benson's real identity explaining a few things. What did you mean?"

Whitten frowned. "It's about Billy Keith, one of my guests here. Came with Mary Lee and she is engaged to him. But Benson horned in, really gave her quite a play. Keith threatened to knock his block off if he didn't stop. And when Benson got sore, Keith told him he'd also notify the cops. Benson shut up like a clam."

"This Bill Keith may be interesting," Kerrigan said. "Don't forget—the death of Benson was murder and the killer must be on this island. Therefore, everyone here is a suspect, including you."

THE others were waiting inside the big house. McGuire, the caretaker, turned out to be a taciturn, grizzle-faced man of about fifty. Kerrigan transferred his gaze to Billy Keith. He stood beside Mary Lee and kept a protective arm about her waist. Mary Lee was something. Even in a sweater and slacks she looked like a young goddess. Her hair was light, her complexion vividly beautiful.

Keith was beginning to turn pink because Kerrigan kept staring at the girl. Or he seemed to be anyhow. Then Kerrigan strode closer to the pair.

"Keith," he said, "you and Mary didn't walk along the beach at the time Benson was murdered."

"All right," Keith said curtly, "I did go back to the altar and I'll tell you why. I wanted to warn Benson again about—well, the way he was acting toward Mary. I looked all over for him. I even went to the Druid rock and leaned against it for some time wondering if he'd show up. He didn't, so I returned to the house and went to sleep."

Kerrigan's right hand suddenly jerked forward and grabbed Keith's wrist. He pulled back his coat sleeve.

"That's blood on your shirt, Keith. Plenty of it on the cuffs. Benson was stabbed over the heart. He bled a lot. You admit going back to the altar. Now explain how this blood got on your shirt cuff."

Keith pulled himself free. He gave Mary Lee a peculiar glance. "I'll tell you. It involves this article in my pocket."

He dug his hand into his hip pocket and it came out holding a thirty-two automatic. Keith stepped back.

"Freeze," he snarled. "Kerrigan, take your gun out and use just two fingers doing it. Whitten, stand just as you are. Cotter, if you even start to get out of that chair, I'll let you have it."

Mary Lee stepped back several paces. "Billy," she gasped. "Billy—I don't understand—"

"I do," Keith snapped. "Someone is trying to frame the murder of Benson on me. Well, I didn't kill him, although he deserved it—the double-crossing ex-con. Now listen, all of you. I'm getting out of here. If anybody follows me, I'll shoot."

Keith backed toward the door, opened it and rushed out. A moment later, Kerrigan went into action, too. He seized the gun Keith had made him drop, slid it into his holster and hurried out. He was gone about half an hour.

When he returned, Mary Lee was sobbing quietly. Whitten looked disgusted. Attorney George Cotter was just bored. Kerrigan did notice that the caretaker kept rather close so as not to miss a word that was being said.

"Well," Whitten demanded. "Did you find the ungrateful—"

"I didn't look," Kerrigan answered. "Maybe you forgot, but this is an island, three miles off shore. To make sure Keith stays with us, I just fixed the only three boats so they won't work. Cotter, I want your help."

"About removing Benson?" Cotter grunted. "Sure, I don't mind, but isn't it customary to bring in a medical examiner?"

"How?" Kerrigan asked. "By sending one of you to the mainland and find out the messenger I selected is the murderer, who promptly takes a runout powder? No, sir—I'm going

to find out who killed Benson and why. Then we'll get the medical examiner."

Whitten gave Kerrigan a sharp glance. "You won't find who killed Benson or why. It was not a human being. Or, at the very least, if you discover that young Keith did it, he wasn't responsible. Go ahead and laugh. I can see the snicker on your face already, but explain that wisp of smoke if you can. Explain why Benson was spreadeagled on the rock, in the position the Druids used for sacrifice. Whatever has happened here is the direct result of that accursed rock. If I had real dynamite, I'd blow the damned thing into bits."

"And release those millions of Druid ghosts?" Attorney Cotter laughed sarcastically. "I gave you credit for more sense, Whitten. Come on, Kerrigan. We have a dead man to take care of."

CHAPTER III

BLOOD FROM A STONE

THEY disposed of the corpse in a boat house near the beach. Cotter offered Kerrigan a cigar and lit it for him. They walked slowly back to the house.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Plain murder, with a plain motive when I bring it to earth," Kerrigan grunted. "Just why are you here?"

Cotter grinned. "Getting right to work, aren't you? That's all right. I came because Whitten retained me about six months ago to handle his affairs. He had some things to do in connection with the lease of this island so I came along to fix them up and, incidentally, to enjoy a short vacation. Vacation? Ha!"

"And Keith came because he was following Mary Lee about, I suppose," Kerrigan grunted. "What about Benson?"

"Don't ask me. Benson didn't seem open and aboveboard to my way of thinking. He acted funny and was

plenty happy about being here, isolated like this. I guess he had some business with Whitten."

"Keep your eyes and ears open, will you?" Kerrigan asked. "Whitten is too scared of his Druid ghosts to make much sense and I hate questioning that girl. I doubt she knows much about this anyhow. This Maguire, the servant, does he stay on the island all the time?"

"He goes with the lease, I guess. More of a caretaker than a servant. Where are you going?"

"To look for Keith. This island is only a couple of miles long. He'll have to take refuge somewhere. I'll find him."

But Kerrigan didn't. He spent more than an hour in a vain hunt and didn't even locate a footprint. Stuffing his flashlight into a hip pocket, he ambled back to the big house. Maguire was standing on the porch, like a wooden Indian. He didn't so much as glance around when Kerrigan walked by.

Cotter had gone to his room. Mary Lee was still seated in the same chair and Whitten was avidly reading a book concerned with Druids. He looked up as Kerrigan entered. So did Mary Lee, and her eyes spoke volumes.

"I didn't find him," Kerrigan announced. "He's as elusive as one of your Druid ghosts, Mr. Whitten."

Whitten flushed. He stood up, slammed the book on a table and closed the living room door. Then he walked up to Kerrigan.

"You're a fool not to believe. Benson didn't, and he's dead. You'll be the next. You or Cotter. I've warned him, too, that this is no time to scoff. And you won't find Keith because he isn't himself any more. He won't even act like a normal person. The soul of that Druid, represented by the wisp of smoke we saw, has taken possession of his body. I've just rechecked on those details and they are true."

"And what happens when the Druid

spirit leaves the body?" Kerrigan grinned openly.

"They never leave," Whitten raged. "Do you know why I ran from that stone this afternoon? Why I urged you to run also? Because that wisp of fog was seeking you or me—to take possession of us. Every Druid altar stone holds the souls of the dead priests. They never died—not entirely. Wait, you'll see."

Kerrigan dropped into a chair and crossed his legs. He chewed on the butt of the cigar which Cotter had given him.

"It will take an awful lot of proof, Mr. Whitten. I'm Irish and maybe I got a wee bit respect for banshees and the like, but not Druids. Hardly ever heard of 'em, in fact, so they can't scare me. Now let's talk about Benson—and Keith. Something more substantial than ghosts. I want to know—Hey, where is that cold breeze coming from? It just passed across my face. Is there a window open or—"

AT THAT moment the lights winked out. The blackout was perfect. Kerrigan couldn't see beyond his nose. He got up and one hand dropped to the butt of his gun. He began moving silently toward the door and reached for his flashlight at the same time.

Before he could unlimber the flash, something came hurtling across the room at him, as though the attacker could penetrate the pitch darkness. Two hands grabbed at his shoulders, transferred themselves to his throat, and Kerrigan was forced back—back—until he was against the wall.

He made an effort to grab his gun, but one of those fists darted down and connected with a side hand blow that paralyzed Kerrigan's whole arm. He heard his gun hit the floor far across the room.

Then he settled down to do some fighting on his own. He used his left hand only because the right was all but useless. His first punch connected with a soft stomach and drew a

wheeze from the attacker. But the two hands were laced around his throat again. The punishment was grueling and he knew that in a short time he'd pass into unconsciousness from which he'd probably never awaken.

Judging his next blow from the spot where the first had landed, he struck his knuckles against the side of someone's head. That hurt him about as much as it did his opponent. He also felt something odd around that temple. It felt like a garland of leaves.

His knees wobbled and he lashed out again, this time doing some real damage because the fingers around his throat loosened. He wrenched himself free. Something whizzed down. A blade slashed through the shoulder of his coat and lacerated the flesh, but not deeply.

Yet that knife thrust had undoubtedly been aimed at his heart. He had a vivid recollection of Benson, sprawled out on the sacrificial altar, and fine beads of sweat broke out on his forehead.

No further attack came. He whipped out his flash, pressed the switch and the first thing he saw was Mary Lee, on the floor. He rushed to her side. Her pulse was strong and steady. Nothing to worry about there. She'd simply fainted.

He swept the room with the torch again. It circled Whitten, who was pressed in a far corner of the room with his arms raised as if to cover his face. He was very white and his eyes bulged in terror. But what made Kerrigan gasp was the garland of leaves draped around his temple. He recalled feeling those on the head of his attacker, and with long strides he stepped up to Whitten.

"What was the idea?" he demanded. "Talk, Whitten. This isn't a picnic any more."

"I don't know what you mean," Whitten protested feebly. "I—I've had a dreadful experience. When the lights went out, there was somebody standing right in back of me. I heard

a voice—so soft it was hard to discern the words—but I heard it all right. We didn't run fast enough this afternoon. That voice told me I was possessed by a Druid."

Kerrigan relaxed. "This stuff is getting you down, Whitten. Now listen—the same guy who whispered in your ear whispered in mine, too—with a knife. Take a look at my coat. A whisper didn't do that, nor a wisp of fog that is supposed to be the spirit of a Druid, either. It was a nice, sharp and very real knife. Furthermore, in the scrap I felt that my opponent was wearing a flock of leaves around his head. A garland—like the one you are wearing now. Explain that."

"But I didn't try to kill you," Whitten said earnestly. "I didn't go anywhere near you. What do you mean about my wearing a garland?"

He raised both hands, found the garland and removed it. He began to tremble. "Oak leaves and mistletoe. The things the Druids worshiped. They used to wear garlands like these during the sacrifices. Kerrigan, I didn't know this was on my head. I swear it."

KERRIGAN took the garland and studied it. "Well, I'll grant you this—the garland wasn't in the room when those lights went out. It's too big for you to have concealed it in your pocket. We'll check later. Miss Lee fainted—she's over there."

Kerrigan's flash picked her out. For a moment he caught the reflection of the light in her eyes and then they were closed. Kerrigan grunted. This girl was playing games.

He carried her over to a davenport while Whitten held the flash. Moments later, she woke up.

"I don't know what happened," she said weakly. "I saw something standing right behind you, Cousin Arch. It looked like a ghost. Then I heard Kerrigan fighting—that's all I remember."

"Let's see about the lights," Kerrigan said. "And where are Maguire

and Cotter? I made enough noise to wake a dead man."

Maguire was in the kitchen and solemnly swore that he heard no sound. Cotter came down from his room on the second floor and also stated he'd heard nothing to attract his attention. Kerrigan led the way back to the living room while Maguire went down cellar to see about the lights.

Before Kerrigan began his search, the lights came back on. Maguire appeared and stated a fuse had blown out.

"It happened very conveniently for the rat who tried to murder me," Kerrigan grunted. "Now let's get this straight. Whitten, you and Miss Lee were the only persons in the living room beside me. Therefore, any intruder had to come in through the door. I don't think that happened because the door squeaks like blazes. That leaves the windows, so let's have a look."

Kerrigan checked all four windows in the room. Each was locked from the inside. He remembered that cool blast of air that swept across him just before the attack. Where had it come from? The windows could only have been opened from inside. How had that would-be killer gained entrance, left via the window and locked it on the inside after him? Kerrigan restrained a shiver. Maybe Whitten knew what he was talking about.

A search of the area surrounding the house revealed nothing. Kerrigan came back to the living room, drew his gun and spun the cylinder experimentally. He shoved the weapon back into its holster.

"I'm going over to the Druid altar," he said slowly. "I intend to stay there all night if necessary. Perhaps the killer of Benson will try to get me or, if Whitten's ideas are true, I'll meet some of those Druids. By the way, Whitten, when I searched the grounds I saw no signs of either an oak tree or a mistletoe bush. Are there any on the island, or did that garland over there on the table ma-

terialize itself like the Druids do?"

"There are two oak trees on the north side of the island. Mistletoe there, too." Whitten was still nervous and showed it in his manner and speech. "Kerrigan, I swear I did not see that garland before. I don't even know how it got on my head."

"Did I say I doubted your word?" Kerrigan parried. "Now everybody stay inside. There's nothing to be afraid of. If the Druids go to work tonight, it will be on me. But they'd better be ghosts because I'm going to find out."

He walked out of the house and into the light of a full moon. He didn't go straight to the big rock, but made a half circle of it and approached from the rear. If Keith or anyone else happened to be lying in wait, he'd be able to strike the first blow.

Kerrigan saw the rock, bathed in moonlight, a few moments later. He gulped, for once more a wisp of white fog was rising slowly from the top of it. White fog that swirled eerily in the moonlight and seemed almost to take actual shape.

His gun ready, Kerrigan started running toward the rock. If that wisp of smoke was caused by a human agency, he meant to find out what was doing it. But there was only the rock, dull and cold.

Kerrigan clambered to the top of it and looked searchingly at the many crevices and cracks. There were no tubes—no wires. Yet he had seen that spectral fog rising slowly upwards. The fog which Whitten claimed was the soul of a long dead Druid priest who possessed the satanic power of lying dormant inside the rock for centuries, to rise again and enter the body of a human being of his choice.

THE garland of leaves—the kind the Druids worshiped and held holy—was an unexplainable factor also. Unless Whitten had placed them on his own head. Then, too, the manner by which the intruder had gained entrance was smacking of the super-

natural. He thought of Mary Lee—the way she'd faked her fainting spell. An average woman would have screamed first and then hit the floor with a thud. Kerrigan hadn't heard her drop.

These matters weighed heavily on his mind and occupied most of his attention, so that he didn't see the figure which approached until it was almost at the foot of the stone. Instantly, Kerrigan's gun came to bear. He relaxed a bit when he made out the features of Arch Whitten. Kerrigan slid to the ground.

"I thought I advised you to stay inside the house," he said.

"I didn't want to come here, but I felt as though I almost belonged," Whitten replied. "That's a sacrificial moon in the sky. I thought that if I were possessed by a Druid spirit, I'd find out for sure if I came here. Something told me to come."

"Something told you?" Kerrigan scoffed. "Now don't tell me you've been hearing voices again."

"But I have. I was in my room—alone. I heard a voice. Very soft and pleasant. A man's voice telling me to come here. That I must come. I knew you'd be somewhere around and I wasn't quite so afraid. Kerrigan, what's happening to us—to me?"

There was a rattling sound behind them and rather high up. Both men spun. Something that glittered in the moonlight came sliding down the side of the rock. It was a knife! A knife with a blood-smeared blade!

Whitten started to bend down for it, but Kerrigan gave him a sudden push to one side and grabbed the weapon himself. He watched Whitten narrowly. The man's eyes were shining too brightly. He gazed at the knife with too much interest.

Kerrigan raced around to the other side of the stone altar. There was no one. Not that he expected to find any one. Whoever or whatever was performing these manifestations was as slippery as an eel. Whitten denied hearing a sound until the knife rattled

on the side of the rock. Kerrigan looked up at the top of the crude altar.

He rapped the handle of the blade against the stone and followed it completely around. There were no hollow noises, nothing to indicate that someone might be concealed within the big stone. He looked up toward the top again.

"Give me a boot up," he told Whitten. "And remember, I have a knife and gun. I'll haul you up afterward if you wish."

Whitten nodded, helped Kerrigan to the top, reached up with both hands and Kerrigan dragged him on top also. They squatted there while Kerrigan gently passed his hand over the surface of the altar. He noted that some of the crevices seemed to have been carved into the stone and pointed this out to Whitten.

Whitten said, "Yes, they were cut into the altar for a specific reason—to let the blood of the sacrifice drain off. Kerrigan, I can't stand this any longer. I'm afraid. Afraid of the Druid spirits and of myself. This is an altar of blood. The sacrificial moon is high. If the Druids will ever appear, it is tonight."

"Cool off," Kerrigan advised. "Nothing will harm you, and now that we are alone, there's a question I'd like to ask. Two of 'em, in fact. Do you think Keith killed Benson?"

"Yes. He had the motive—his shirt was bloodstained. And if you check the murder knife in Benson's heart, you'll find it belonged to Keith or carries his fingerprints."

"The knife?" Kerrigan grunted. "This knife which fell off the top of this altar is the same one which killed Benson. The blood on it is dry and I recognize the handle. I'll check for prints later. Now for the other question. It concerns your cousin. Did she invite herself to this shindig or did you ask her here?"

Whitten looked startled. "I—why, she asked to come, of course. Said she always wanted to see the island, and I had no objection. What are you get-

ting at? Or wait—I can guess. You think Keith knew Benson was coming, too. That he wanted a crack at him in a place where no one could interfere and where he might get away with it.

"Perhaps you're right. Yet I insist that Keith didn't do this of his own free will. He admitted being out of the house last night when Benson was killed. I think Keith is possessed of one of those Druid souls. What he does isn't of his own volition."

"Pulling that rod on us was," Kerrigan said crisply. "Okay, Mr. Whitten. If you want to leave, it's all right. But I'm staying until dawn. I'll either prove or disprove these Druid ghosts."

Whitten nodded mutely and slid down the side of the rock. He vanished into the night.

CHAPTER IV

THE HUMAN GHOST

KERRIGAN realized that simply waiting at this altar for things to happen wouldn't get him far. Therefore, he started walking rapidly toward the north end of the island where Whitten had indicated that oak trees and mistletoe bushes grew. Kerrigan moved warily. There was still young Billy Keith to remember. He was armed, practically proven a killer, and might attack swiftly and without warning.

Kerrigan found the oak trees and noted with considerable interest that small, low branches had been torn off the tree. He located the mistletoe bushes, too, and they'd been likewise stripped of branches. There was a gradual slope to the left, and Kerrigan moved toward this. Halfway up it, he found a small, shallow cave.

He didn't dare use his flash until he was well inside the cave, and even then he shielded the lens so that only a tiny ray of light emanated. On the dirt floor of the cave he found the branches which had been ripped off the oak trees and the mistletoe bushes. Here was the spot where that garland

had been fashioned. This let Whitten out of the picture and pinned the blame for that attack in the living room on Keith. He was the only person loose on the island.

Kerrigan's flash showed something else that was highly significant. There were heel prints in the dirt—those from high-heeled shoes. That meant Mary Lee. She was apparently helping Keith.

Then Kerrigan heard a faint snap of a branch. He ducked out of the cave and threw himself flat on the ground behind a bush. A shadowy figure approached the cave slowly. There was a gun in the man's hand and moonlight soon revealed his identity. It was Billy Keith. He entered the cave, stayed there about two minutes and then headed straight toward the big house.

Kerrigan decided not to grab him immediately. It was best to let Keith show his hand. Kerrigan had an idea Benson's murder had been committed for more than pure hatred. Keith might show the way to a complete solution of the case.

Keith moved rapidly, as though he'd followed the trail to the house often enough to be familiar with it. Kerrigan held far back, and when he reached the house, there were no signs of Keith. A weak light burned in the hallway, but the rest of the house was in darkness.

Then, suddenly, the eerie silence was broken by a scream. Cotter's voice, Kerrigan guessed. The scream came again, and then shouts for help. Kerrigan raced to the front door, found it locked and pounded on the panels. It required three or four minutes before Maguire let him in. The caretaker was fully dressed and he held a short, ugly looking club in his hand.

"It's upstairs," Maguire said hoarsely. "Somebody else has been killed. I'm getting off this island before I'm murdered, too."

Kerrigan rushed up the steps. Mary Lee was in the hallway, clutching a

negligée around her slim figure. Cotter was there, too, one arm bleeding slightly. Whitten wasn't in sight, not just then, but he came out of his room blinking owlishly a moment later.

Cotter said, "I was just dozing off. I heard a sound, opened my eyes and someone was standing over me—with a knife. It slashed my arm. Why it didn't slice right into my heart, I don't know. I was too stunned to put up much of a fight, and the killer just dashed through the door and that's all I know."

Mary Lee came forward, gave Whitten a strange look and then faced Kerrigan. "I wasn't asleep," she explained. "When I came into the corridor right after Mr. Cotter screamed, I saw my cousin, Arch Whitten, enter his room. He looked as if he were walking in his sleep—and he had a knife in his hand."

"You're mad," Whitten howled. "I *was* asleep. I swear it. I don't remember getting out of bed until this racket awakened me."

RUSHING by Whitten, Kerrigan entered his room and began searching it. He required only a couple of minutes to unearth a knife, with a still bloody blade, hidden beneath a corner of the rug. Whitten looked at it and turned deathly pale.

"I never saw that before. I swear I never did."

Kerrigan pushed Whitten into a chair and stood over him looking down sternly. "Remember what you said about young Keith? That one of those Druid spirits took possession of him and he didn't know what he was doing? Maybe the same thing applies to you. Mary said you looked as though you were walking in your sleep. Whitten, I think you ought to be handcuffed to something very substantial—to keep you from roaming about with murder in your heart."

Whitten slumped deep into the chair. "I can't deny what you say," he admitted. "If Mary saw me, then I must have been in Cotter's room, but

I didn't know it. What I told you about Druid transmigration of souls is the truth. Every book explains it. I brought them all back from England with me when I purchased the altar. I laughed, too, at first, but I don't laugh now."

"Let's be sensible about this," Cotter broke in. "There's no necessity for handcuffing Whitten or restraining him in any other way. I'll stay with him, right by his side every moment, and if he starts acting funny, I swear I'll slug him."

"Good," Kerrigan grunted. He faced Mary Lee and made a strange statement in a low voice that was for her benefit alone. "You're not doing so badly either."

Mary Lee turned pink and hastily walked to her own room. The door closed and Kerrigan heard the lock turn. He grinned and went downstairs. Maguire was there, peering interestedly up at the stairwell and listening to everything that was said.

In answer to Kerrigan's question, he replied, "No, sir—nobody could have entered the house. Last thing I did was lock all windows and double lock all doors. The only way anybody could have got in was by having one of us, already inside, open a door or window."

Kerrigan nodded and went out. He headed straight back to the cave where Keith was hiding out. The solution to this strange case was rapidly taking shape in Kerrigan's mind, but he also knew that all danger was far from past.

He crouched and studied the cave intently. It seemed to be empty so he moved forward, entered it and drew his gun. Squatting far back in the shadows, he waited. Keith would return here shortly.

Half an hour passed before Keith appeared. He was running and dodging from one bush or tree to another as though he feared pursuit. He entered the cave and Kerrigan grabbed him. He spun the younger man around

and pressed the muzzle of his service pistol into Keith's stomach.

"Keep 'em up," Kerrigan ordered brusquely. "I want that hardware you're carrying about. Make one move and so help me, I'll drill you."

Keith groaned. "Okay, I know when I'm licked, but I wish I had another hour or two."

"For what purpose?" Kerrigan extracted the other's gun and dropped it into his own pocket. He frisked the rest of Keith's clothing, found nothing, but kept his prisoner firmly pressed against one wall of the cave.

"To prove I didn't kill Benson, even though he deserved to be killed. The man was a crook, the rottenest kind of a thief. I was sure of that even before you told us. Every time he passed a policeman, he ducked. So I got sore one night and mentioned something about telling the cops. Benson pulled in his neck."

"Did Whitten egg him on—about Mary, I mean?"

"I'd say so, even though I'm prejudiced. You see, Whitten and Mary inherited some money a few years ago. Whitten manages her affairs, and I think he is afraid that if Mary and I get married—well, I'll naturally take over. It's just a hunch, mind you, but he may be pilfering some of her money. He isn't quite as wealthy as he pretends to be. I'm even afraid of what he'd do to Mary."

"Is that why you came here—to this island? With Mary?"

Keith nodded. "You guessed it. Now look at the spot I'm in. What are you going to do with me?"

"Well, first of all we'll find a nice big tree and then I'll handcuff you around it. Come on—and remember, this gun shoots straight and I pull the trigger fast. I'm still not sure of you, Keith."

"If you do that," Keith warned, "I'll never have to stand trial for murder. I'll be killed."

"We'll see," Kerrigan said. "Get going."

AFTER cuffing Keith to a tree, Kerrigan proceeded straight toward the Druid altar, walked boldly up to it. He didn't have to wait very long. Someone came out of the darkness behind the stone, carrying a fairly large leather sack in one hand. It was Whitten.

"Kerrigan," he gasped. "I didn't expect to find you here. I— What's the matter?"

Kerrigan approached the man slowly. "Nothing is wrong with me, but there is going to be an awful lot wrong with you, Whitten. What's in that sack? Where did you get it?"

Whitten dropped the sack. "I don't know what's in it. I found the thing back there. You act as though you thought I was responsible for all this."

"Why not?" Kerrigan kicked the sack and tipped it over. The thongs drawn around the neck of it gave way. They seemed to be very rotted. A mass of jewels spilled out on the ground.

Whitten gave a forward leap. His left hand, which had been behind his back, suddenly appeared holding a gun. Kerrigan made a play for his own weapon about half a second too late.

"Don't try it," Whitten warned. "I don't want to kill you. You, above everyone else, must live because you know where the parts of the boats are hidden and I must get off this island."

"With the loot from one of the cleverest jewel thief gangs ever cornered?" Kerrigan asked. "I know that Benson, alias Deek Chandler, got out of prison not so long ago. A man named Rossiter was his cell mate and one of the jewel thief gang. He must have spilled the hiding place of this stuff. So Benson, or Deek Chandler, murdered Rossiter quite cleverly, making it seem as though Rossiter tried a getaway and then committed suicide. Benson heard you had leased the place and he went to see you. Benson was willing to split the take for your help."

"You're guessing," Whitten ad-

mitted, "and very good, too. Whatever has happened before is nothing compared to the events that have transpired tonight. I'm invested with the soul of a Druid priest. Yes, I tried to kill Cotter and for no reason at all. He doesn't know anything about this. I must have tried to kill you, too, in the living room. I don't know."

"My own mind has been superseded by that of a Druid. Therefore, don't balk me. I can't help what I do and there's murder in my heart. Turn around and walk straight to the dock. Don't go near the house because if anyone appears, I swear I'll kill that person and you, too."

Kerrigan kept his hands up and walked as slowly as he dared toward the dock. Whitten had disarmed him, even to the gun he'd taken from young Keith. Kerrigan had no doubts about his ultimate fate, once he had made one of those boats ready for travel. Yet, unless he did that, Whitten was apt to shoot and take his own chances.

"You murdered Benson, didn't you?" Kerrigan asked slowly. "You didn't want to split the take because you'd located the hiding place. Benson didn't stay out to taunt the Druids. He was looking for the jewelry and you knew it. You returned, lured him to the top of the altar somehow and then killed him. He didn't expect anything like that from you and he had no chance to resist. Then you spread him out on top of the altar so it would look like a Druid sacrifice."

"What if I did?" Whitten snapped. "Benson was going to cheat me. Careful now. No tricks. Where did you hide the ignition parts for those motors?"

KERRIGAN walked down the beach, lifted a large stone and removed the missing parts. Under Whitten's watchful eye and gun, he climbed into a fast speed launch, replaced the equipment and fussed around with the motor.

"If you start this baby," he warned, "everybody in the house will hear it."

Give me a break and I'll help you to get clear, Whitten."

"It's a bargain," Whitten replied, almost too quickly.

"I'll shove you way out into the water. Then you can start the motor and be gone before they get down here. I'll wade back and say I tried to stop you, but I couldn't. For that service, you just forget about plugging me and also admit that Benson killed Rossiter."

Whitten licked his lips, kept the gun trained on Kerrigan and climbed into the boat. Kerrigan seized the prow, waded into the water and shoved off. He rapidly turned the craft around until her nose pointed toward the mainland. By this time, Kerrigan was in the water beyond his waist.

"Okay," he told Whitten. "You can start her up now."

"Thanks," Whitten smiled crookedly. "You are right about Benson. He didn't think Rossiter would be released so soon. When he was, Benson knew he'd tell where the jewels were in return for a break on some other charge. That's what you wanted to know, but it won't do you much good."

The gun leveled and Kerrigan suddenly ducked completely under the water. The bullet was well aimed, but Kerrigan had moved very fast. He began swimming under water. Whitten let loose a string of oaths and started the engine. There was a terrific explosion aft. The small boat rocked badly. Her stern started to burn. In a moment the fire would reach the fuel tanks. Whitten grabbed the sacks of jewels and jumped overboard.

He came to the surface again and looked wildly toward shore. Suddenly he spied Kerrigan, a gun in his hand—Keith's gun which Whitten had evidently dropped in his haste to reach the launch. Kerrigan grinned at him.

"We meet again, pal."

Later Cotter, Maguire, Mary Lee and Keith were assembled in the living room. The handcuffs which had

clamped Keith to the trees were now around Whitten's wrists and he was slumped in a chair, listening to words that would finally strap him into a different and much more uncomfortable chair.

Billy Keith stood close to Mary and held her hand. "I can talk now," he said. "I knew Benson and Whitten were up to something. After Benson was murdered, I decided to make Whitten act. He really believed in those Druids so I worked on him. I tried to scare him into revealing why he came to this island with Benson."

"That," Kerrigan grinned, "I already surmised. In fact, I can even tell you how those wisps of fog came out of that rock. You slipped bits of dry ice into the crevices. They evaporated, caused the wisps and disappeared themselves without a trace. Nothing else could have done that."

"You should be a cop—not a parole officer," Keith grunted.

"Thanks," Kerrigan said. "I'd rather help convicts than send them up. That is, excepting men like Whitten. Mary helped you, too, by opening doors and windows so you could get in, and then locking them later on. What about the scrap in this room—the garland we found on Whitten's head?"

"All part of my plans," Keith admitted. "I had to make Whitten believe he was imbued with the spirit of a Druid. I read his books, too, and knew what would make him believe. I didn't mean to cut your coat, Kerrigan. I did give you quite a battle and I wore one of those garlands on my head and made sure you touched it. Then I put another on Whitten's head, whispered in his ear and beat it through the window."

"And the same thing went with Cotter?" Kerrigan nodded. "Undoubtedly you did not intend to cut him. You hid the knife in Whitten's room. Mary claimed she saw him walking around the hall. That really did it, I think. Whitten became positive he was a Druid priest. Of course, Whitten murdered Benson and got the bril-

liant idea of pinning the blame on you—killing two birds with one knife. Well, Mr. Cotter, you'd better take a boat, go to the mainland and get the medical examiner."

COTTER stroked a large lump on his head. "I'm lucky he isn't coming over to examine me. Whitten must have realized he had to get off this island before the Druids took him bodily. He slugged me with a fireplace poker. Anyway, we're all very grateful for everything, Kerrigan."

"I'm the man to express my thanks," Kerrigan grunted. "Whitten is going to talk a lot. Benson, alias Deek Chandler, told him quite a lot. Benson killed Rossiter whom I was taking to the city. Benson had to stop him from talking about the jewelry so he sneaked into the wash room of a gas station, waited until Rossiter came along and then lured him into the wash room. He probably choked him, but was careful to leave no marks. Then Benson shot one of the station attendants."

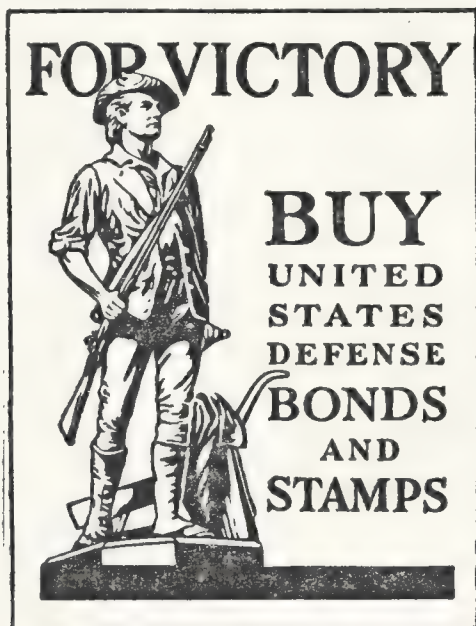
"I remember reading about it," Cot-

ter said. "They blamed the whole thing on you. Indicated that Rossiter was trying to make a break for freedom."

"He wasn't," Kerrigan said. "Benson returned to the wash room, climbed through the window, but held Rossiter. He fired at me through the door, just waited long enough and then shot Rossiter through the head. He arranged it to look like suicide and then got away. I discovered Benson had been Rossiter's cellmate and went looking for him, learned that Whitten had taken him under his wing and trailed both of them to this island."

Cotter said, "Well, I'll take the launch and go to the mainland."

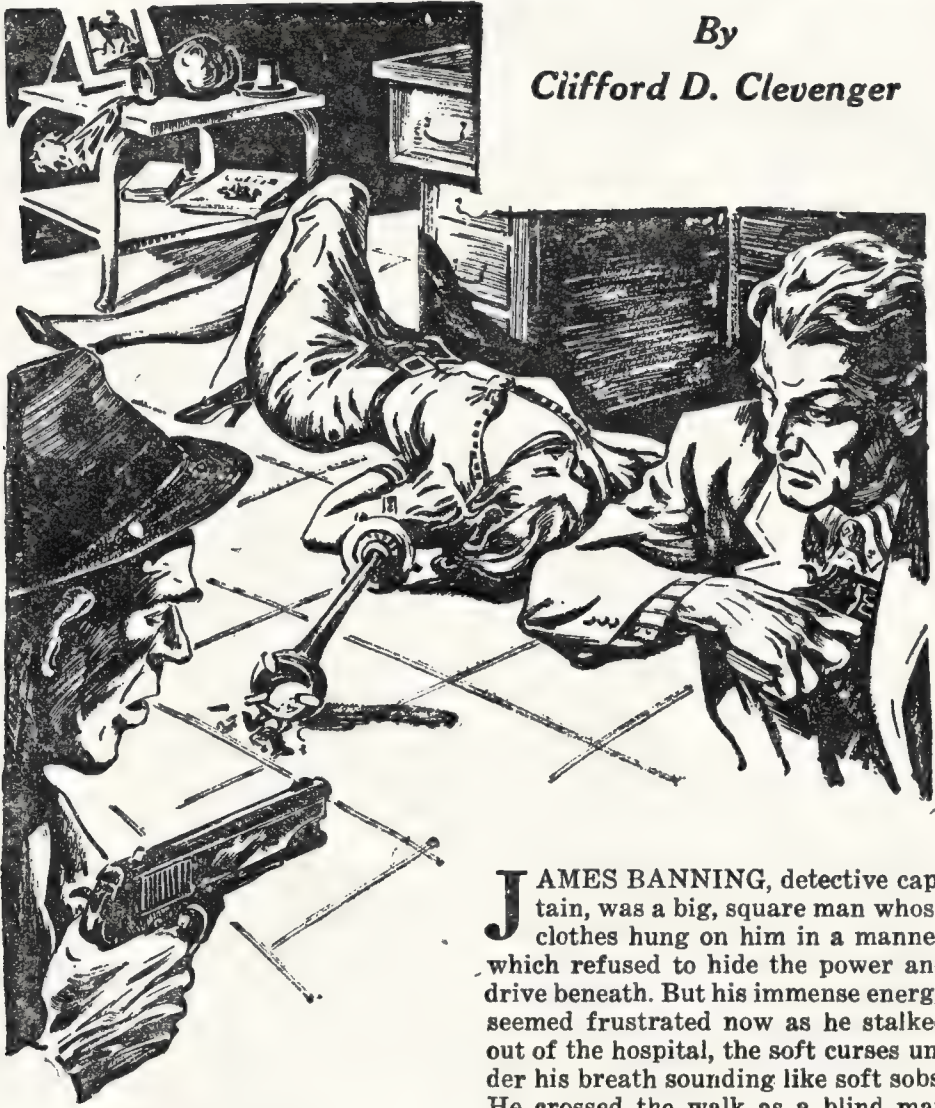
"Not the launch," Kerrigan stopped him. "It's on the bottom of the ocean. Whitten made me put back the engine part I removed from the craft. As I did so, I fixed the wiring so that when he used the starter, the fuel supply would blow up. Step on it, will you? Some of Whitten's Druid friends may start seeping through the cracks of the house and try to rescue him."



Keep Your Shroud On!

By

Clifford D. Clevenger



Detective Banning was always ready to help a pal. But when he tried to go to bat for his H. Q. sidekick, bullets came blazing in his own direction from a homicide hot-bed.

JAMES BANNING, detective captain, was a big, square man whose clothes hung on him in a manner which refused to hide the power and drive beneath. But his immense energy seemed frustrated now as he stalked out of the hospital, the soft curses under his breath sounding like soft sobs. He crossed the walk as a blind man does, groped for the squad car door, and climbed in.

"Doc Prescott says Bob Perry doesn't want to get well if his wife is going to prison," Banning told Reilly in a low, gruff voice which failed to hide his grief. "And Bob lies there crying, 'It's all my fault, Jim.'"

"But it can't be," Reilly protested, "for Bob was in the hospital when Eva

shot Lulu Shard at the Blue Moon last night. Bob's just out of his head with fever from those gunshot wounds."

"Bob's mighty sick, but he's not out of his head," Banning said dejectedly. "Remember, we left him in the dining room to watch Lulu Shard while we searched the flat." Sergeant Reilly nodded. "Well, it seems Eva's been wanting a new buffet and this built-in one in Lulu's flat caught Bob's eye. He started to examine the mirror, a fancy cut-glass affair. That's when Lulu grabbed the shotgun and let him have it."

"And so Bob told his wife all this and she potted Lulu at the first chance." Reilly let out the clutch slowly, as he rambled on. "The whole thing has never made sense to me," he said. "The only person who wants to kill the cop is the person who's being arrested for the first time. And Lulu's been picked up plenty. Why should she have shot Bob?"

"Nothing that women do makes sense," Banning growled. "There's no good in them. If Bob had kept away from them—"

"You're just sore because Bob broke out of the groove you had planned for him and married Eva," Reilly cut in. "I know you think of Bob as almost a son, but Eva isn't such a bad kid. She went right back to singing with the orchestra at the Blue Moon the minute she found out Bob's disability pay wouldn't meet all the expenses."

"She did that so she'd get a chance to shoot Lulu Shard."

"You're being unreasonable," Reilly protested. "Eva could have shot Lulu any time after Jake Folrem bailed Lulu out on the charges we had against her. There's the real trouble!" Reilly said indignantly as he turned a corner. "Folrem and his Protective Bail Bond Company. He bails all his criminal law clients out and has those skip that he can't get free in court. And the state's attorney has never been able to collect a cent on any of those defaulted bonds."

"The state's attorney can't get hold

of the real accounts of the company," Banning explained. "Folrem has dummy books and keeps a legal jump ahead all the time."

"**S**OMEONE ought to shoot Folrem," Reilly growled. And then he added: "But that wouldn't do Eva no good. If we're going to help Bob we've got to prove Eva didn't shoot Lulu and do it quick."

"What we've got to do is prove she did," Banning countered. "Then we can force her to confess and rig up a self-defense plea. It's our only chance."

"Maybe you know what you're doing," Reilly said doubtfully. "But Eva's a little spitfire and may not take to the idea."

"Eva's in jail where she belongs and won't have anything to say about it," Banning declared. "Now tell me something about this fellow Lulu Shard used to team up with. You were on the fraud squad once and ought to know all about him."

"Rube Jones is his name," Reilly answered without hesitation. "Looks and dresses like a farmer. He and a pal used to meet travelers at railroad stations and match pennies till they got all the stranger's money. Rube and Lulu used to shake down unsuspecting gents by threats to prosecute under the Mann Act. Rube hangs out at the Rancho Club."

"That sounds like a good place to start. Let's go."

On the way Banning quickly ran over the pertinent facts of the previous evening at the Blue Moon Club. Eva Perry had been found in the club office with the body of Lulu Shard and the door locked by key on the inside. Eva was lying unconscious on the floor with the gun beside her when Manager Duccion had the door broken open after hearing the shot.

The office was dark, and it took several minutes to get a light because all the lamp cords had been pulled out of their sockets. But the patrolman on the beat was there and he had guard-

ed the door just to see that no one slipped out during the confusion. The two small office windows were securely barred, so no one could have left after locking the door. Lulu Shard had been shot with Duccino's gun, but he kept it in his desk, where anyone could have got it.

Jake Folrem, who was attorney for the club and often met his clients there, was on hand when Banning arrived. Folrem had obviously coached everyone in the stories they were to tell. Eva Perry had related a fantastic tale about not knowing Lulu Shard was there, and that a strange masculine voice had called her into the office as she passed on her way to the dressing room.

Banning had been unable to shake her confidence last night, but was sure he could get a confession as soon as he completed his investigation. For he would then be able to show that no one else could have done the shooting.

THE Rancho Club was a cheap tavern near the railroad station. Dirty crêpe paper festoons hung from light fixtures. Faded liquor ads littered the windows. Several railroad men with black caps and handkerchiefs knotted around their necks stood at the bar as Banning entered. He walked by them toward the smoke-stale, liquor-scented back room where a middle-aged man sat listening with evident displeasure to swing band tunes from the juke box.

The man was slightly plump, greying at the temples, and his clothes fitted him with that mail order look. His face was ruddy, windburned, his big hands brown and knotty. He looked up guilelessly as Banning stopped beside him.

"They're not like the good old tunes, captain," Rube Jones said philosophically. "Remember *Turkey in the Straw*, *Barbary Allen*, *Auld Lang Syne*?"

"I didn't come here to discuss music," Banning snapped.

Rube Jones turned away from the

illuminated music box with a sigh. "That's what I was afraid of, captain." His blue eyes looked up innocently at the officer.

"When did you last see Lulu Shard?"

"The day before she shot this policeman," Rube replied without hesitation. "Met her on the street. Her and me broke up a couple of months ago, you know. I don't blame her for pulling out, captain. I'm just small time and getting old."

"What was she doing?"

"I consider it rude to pry into other people's affairs."

"Why you—" Banning made a beligerent move toward Jones.

Rube held up his hand without any show of fear. "Take it easy, captain. You know you can't scare me. If I can help the police I'll be glad to, the same as any other citizen. But I keep out of a lot of trouble by minding my own business." His voice was low and without rancor, and it soothed Banning as Jones knew it would.

"Lulu Shard was murdered last night at the Blue Moon Club," Banning told him.

Jones nodded, pulled out a red bandanna handkerchief, blew his nose hard. "I really thought a lot of Lulu, captain. I warned her against the dangers of the big time. Those boys ain't playing for marbles. Now me, I'm satisfied with a living."

"So Lulu was trying to shake down big money?"

"That's what I gathered from her talk. But things must not have been going too well, for she was broke when I talked to her. Loaned her a fin to eat with. She looked like she hadn't had a square meal in a week."

"And you haven't any idea what she was doing?"

"I've told you twice, captain, that I never pry into other people's affairs." Jones hesitated a moment, then added: "That lad she shot—is he getting along all right?" Banning shook his head, and Jones went on. "Shooting policemen is foolish. It doesn't

solve anything, for there's always another one. Now me, I never believed in violence. I always say the tongue is mightier than the gun."

"Are you sure, Jones, that Lulu hadn't already got her money, and that you were collecting your five-dollar loan with interest?"

"There you go, captain, always thinking evil of people. Would I be sitting here if I had the bucks?"

"You're smart enough to do just that."

"I'm also smart enough not to shoot anyone."

ON THE way back downtown Banning answered Reilly's question. "Rube's story checks with what we already know. I want to see Jake Folrem, then I'll talk to Eva."

But Folrem was not at his office, so they went on. As Reilly curbed the car in front of the country jail he exclaimed: "There's Jake Folrem just coming out now."

Banning leaped out, called, "Folrem!"

The criminal lawyer turned slowly. He was a big man, as big as Banning, but there was a smoothness about him that the detective captain lacked. Where Banning was square and angular, Folrem had the silkiness of the jungle cat. And it wasn't the hundred-dollar suit Folrem wore or the recent shave and massage his face showed that gave him his appearance. He was naturally that way.

There was a belligerent glint in his eyes now as he faced Banning. "If you're sore about Lulu Shard's murder, what do you think I am? I lost a good client. There ought to be a law against policemen's wives shooting criminals."

"Maybe there is," Banning said.

Even Folrem lost his composure for a moment. "You don't mean you're going to prosecute?" Then he added: "You didn't stop to tell me that."

"I want to know where Lulu Shard got the money for her bail bond. You must have charged her a stiff pre-

mium for a ten-thousand-dollar bond."

"I never pry into the financial affairs of my client," Folrem said stiffly, and then he seemed to mellow. "Hell, Banning, I don't know why Lulu was such an idiot as to shoot Perry. The charge you were arresting her on didn't mean a thing. I could have beat it without half trying. But she has to up and shoot a cop, and even I couldn't beat a case like that with a packed jury."

"All women are like that," Banning declared, and stalked into the jail.

Banning stood in the open cell door and looked down at Eva Perry, who crouched dry-eyed and tight-lipped on a stool in the corner. She was a little thing. "No bigger than a minute," Bob Perry had said. She had dark hair and eyes, almost doll-like features, and a pensive expression that made most men stop and look twice.

"Why don't you admit you did it?" Banning shot at her. "It's your best chance to help Bob. Then we could rig up a self-defense plea and get you off."

"If I were sure I could save Bob by confessing, I'd do it, even though I'm innocent," Eva declared. Banning snorted his disgust, and Eva Perry leaped up, standing rigid with clenched fists, facing him.

"You don't want to believe me!" she cried. "That's why you don't go out and get the real murderer. You wouldn't believe me even if you knew I was telling the truth. You want to hurt Bob and me."

"You're the one who's hurting Bob," Banning said gruffly. "You with your ideas of revenge. Like all women you're not satisfied to let the law take its course. You want things done your way. You've had your way now. Why don't you admit it? I doubt if a jury would convict you. You're pretty enough to charm any dozen men and lead them around by the nose the way you've led Bob Perry."

"You hate me!" Eva raced on. "You've hated me since the day Bob and I were married! I know it, Jim Banning. That's why I don't trust you."

I'll get out of here and save both Bob and myself. I'll never talk to you, Jim Banning. I'll see you in hell first."

COLOR had flooded into Eva's face now, and her eyes were blazing. "Just try to get a confession out of me!" she dared him. "Beat me! Use all your vicious methods! I'll never talk! You ought to be good at it, too. Tough Jim Banning, the woman beater." Her lips curled around the last words.

Banning gritted his teeth, turned speechless from the cell door. He tromped along the cell corridor, the main corridor, and out to the squad car. He was white-faced when he slid into the seat, and Reilly knew he had failed.

But Reilly said nothing, just sat and watched his chief staring straight ahead. Suddenly Banning straightened. "We'll go to the hospital, get Doc Prescott. Have him talk to Eva. He'll be able to convince her there's only one way to save Bob."

At the hospital Dr. Prescott was busy, and they had to wait almost half an hour before he came into his office. "We had to give Perry another transfusion. If he doesn't rally by tomorrow I can't hold out much hope for his recovery."

"That's what we came to see you about," Banning explained. "If you talk to Eva Perry, explain all about this, she'll probably confess. Then we can rig up a self-defense plea and get her acquitted. Then Bob will get well."

"But you've told her all this, haven't you? What good will it do for me to repeat it?"

"Eva doesn't trust me," Banning explained. "I—well—she thinks I'm trying to deceive her."

Dr. Prescott looked out the window for a full minute before he turned back to them. "I'll do all I can to save my patient. I'll talk to his wife, tell her the true conditions, but I'll have no part in advising her to make a confession."

Banning leaped up. "That's great,

doctor. We've got a car waiting. We'll take you right over."

"I'll be busy here for fifteen or twenty minutes. You go ahead. I'll come soon as I'm free."

On the way back to the jail Banning argued with Reilly. "You've got to talk to Eva, Reilly. Prepare her for the doctor's visit. You can convince her a confession is Bob's only chance. Tell her anything. Tell her I'm a heel. Tell her I'll quit the force if she'll confess."

"Will you?"

"I'll do anything to help Bob. I can get on the force in another city."

"You'll lose your seniority."

Banning turned to his sergeant in exasperation. "Good Lord, Reilly, what good is my seniority if Bob doesn't get well. I'd say I shot Lulu if it would help."

Sergeant Reilly shook his grizzled head. "I'll do all I can, Jim, but she probably won't listen to me either." He parked in front of the jail, fumbled with the gear shift, wiped imaginary spots off the windshield.

"Get going," Banning said in irritation.

"All right," Reilly answered. He climbed out and crossed the walk reluctantly.

In less than a minute Reilly burst out of the jail shouting, "She's gone!"

"Escaped?"

Reilly shook his head. "Jake Folrem bailed her out!"

BANNING stared at Reilly for just a moment, then slid over into the driver's seat, jabbed the starter. Reilly leaped onto the running board, climbed in as Banning roared away from the curb in second.

With the siren wailing, Banning needled his way through downtown traffic, cars scuttling aside like fowls from the scream of the hawk. Through town and out onto the west side he roared, so intent on his driving that he failed to heed Reilly's shouts as to where they were going. He skidded the car into a side street, into an alley,

and killed the engine when he jabbed on the brakes. He jumped out while the car was still rolling.

"Do you have to scare hell out of a guy just to get to the alley back of Lulu Shard's flat?" Reilly gasped.

But Banning was already sprinting across the rear yard, up the rickety steps. He tried the door, the window. Both were locked. He turned the window latch with the blade of his penknife, raised the sash, stepped inside. It was dark in these old flats, even in the daytime. He listened, heard a rasping sound as of someone having difficulty in breathing. Then a man moved out from the opposite wall a few wavering steps.

Light from the dingy window struck his face, and Banning gasped, "Rube Jones." It was Rube Jones, all right, with red blood staining the lower expanse of his white shirt. His eyes were glazed, his fists knotted above his head to ease the agony showing in his face.

Banning leaped to his side. Rube's eyes cleared for a moment as they focused on the detective. "They don't play for marbles in—"

Jones collapsed. Banning lowered the body to the floor, mechanically felt for the pulse he knew was not there. This was one time Rube had found that the tongue was not mightier than the gun.

A cold hard rage flowed through Banning. Not satisfied with shooting Lulu Shard, Eva Perry had killed again. But Banning's intelligence told him there was more to this than revenge. Rube's last words had been prophetic. There was a stake, a mighty big stake involved, and Banning meant to find it.

He started toward the front of the apartment, through swinging doors into the serving pantry, along a short hall into the dining room.

A big man, as big as Banning, was struggling with Eva Perry. He had one arm around her, with his palm over her mouth. In his other hand he held a revolver, trying to keep it out

of her grasp. He saw Banning, swung the girl before him as a shield, and fired.

Banning sidestepped, but not fast enough. He felt the bullet numb his left arm. He reached for his gun, but stopped. He might hit Eva Perry if he started shooting now, and he couldn't take that chance. He leaped forward in a low crouch. Those twelve feet seemed like as many miles. Two more shots roared, and Banning knew at least one of them had hit him.

Then he had the gun hand and was forcing it upward. The man, impeded by his grip on Eva Perry, suddenly hurled her aside.

"Folrem!" Banning gasped.

FOLREM seemed crazed as he sunk his now free left fist in Banning's side, the blow ripping across one of the bullet wounds. Banning winced.

Folrem rushed across the room, grabbed up a chair, and charged with it held high over his head. Banning stepped forward to meet him, dived low to the right, stuck out his foot. Folrem tripped, went to his knees, smashing the chair on the floor in front of him. Banning leaped, his full weight landing on Folrem's back. Air rushed out of Folrem's lungs in an audible gasp as he sank to the floor unconscious.

Eva Perry scrambled to her feet, holding Folrem's gun. She did not threaten Banning, but edged around the wall toward the buffet.

"Go ahead and shoot me," Banning pleaded. "Say I shot Lulu. Say I shot Rube Jones. Say anything you want just so it will save Bob."

But Eva Perry did not answer. She yanked out a drawer from the buffet, dumped its contents on the floor. She scattered them with one foot, keeping an eye on Banning. Then she yanked out another drawer, did the same.

Banning sat there helplessly watching her. He knew he could not get up and walk that far, knew he did not even have strength enough to draw his gun and hold it.

Things were beginning to swim before his eyes. It was Eva there at the buffet, but just a moment ago it seemed to be Lulu Shard. Lulu with a sawed-off shotgun blasting the life out of young Bob Perry. And now this girl was doing the same thing, only in another way.

And then the fog suddenly seemed to float away from before Banning's eyes, and the whole thing was clear, clear as a crystal pool in which every stone and pebble was plainly visible. And Eva Perry was standing there beside the empty buffet drawers, sobbing:

"It's—it's n-not here."

Banning gritted his teeth against the pain in his side, but managed to say: "The mirror, Eva. Behind the mirror. That's where it is."

Eva grabbed up a broken chair and swung it against the mirror. The glass cracked. She struck again and again, knocking pieces loose. Finally she pulled out a sheet of paper which had been hidden between the mirror and the wall. She broke out more glass, pulled out more sheets, and handed them to Banning.

"These are the secret accounts, the real records of Folrem's Protective Bail Bond Company," Banning gasped. "The district attorney has been searching months for them; claims there's enough evidence here to convict Folrem and wreck his whole racket."

THE only person who wants to kill the cop is the person who's being arrested for the first time," Banning told reporters at the hospital after his wounds were dressed. "That's what bothered us about Lulu Shard. Why should she have shot Perry? She's been picked up dozens of times."

He didn't wait for answers but hurried on. "Well, I found out today. It seems Lulu had evidence which would convict Folrem and wreck his bail bond racket, and she had it hidden behind the mirror of this built-in buffet in her dining room. Now Bob Perry

was interested in getting a buffet for his wife, and he liked this one in Lulu's flat and started to examine it.

"Lulu thought he was looking for the evidence she had against Folrem, the papers she was counting on to pay her a young fortune. She got panicky and shot him.

"Folrem saw in this shooting the chance to kill Lulu, who was blackmailing him, and lay the blame on Eva Perry. He got Lulu out on bail, paying the premium himself, as she was broke. He had her meet him at the Blue Moon Club, knocked her unconscious with a sandbag or something similar which wouldn't leave a mark.

"Then he hid, called in Eva, sandbagged her from behind, and shot Lulu. He just stayed behind the door till the others burst into the darkened office. In the few minutes it took them to get a light burning, he mingled with the crowd unseen and was one of them.

"Eva Perry told Folrem today she thought something valuable was hidden in Lulu Shard's flat, so he bailed her out and took her to the flat. Now Rube Jones had also figured there was a big stake hidden there and was looking for it. Folrem shot him and was trying to kill Eva Perry when I arrived."

As Banning finished his story, the camera men suggested, "Just one more picture, captain," and posed Eva beside him. Banning scowled deeply.

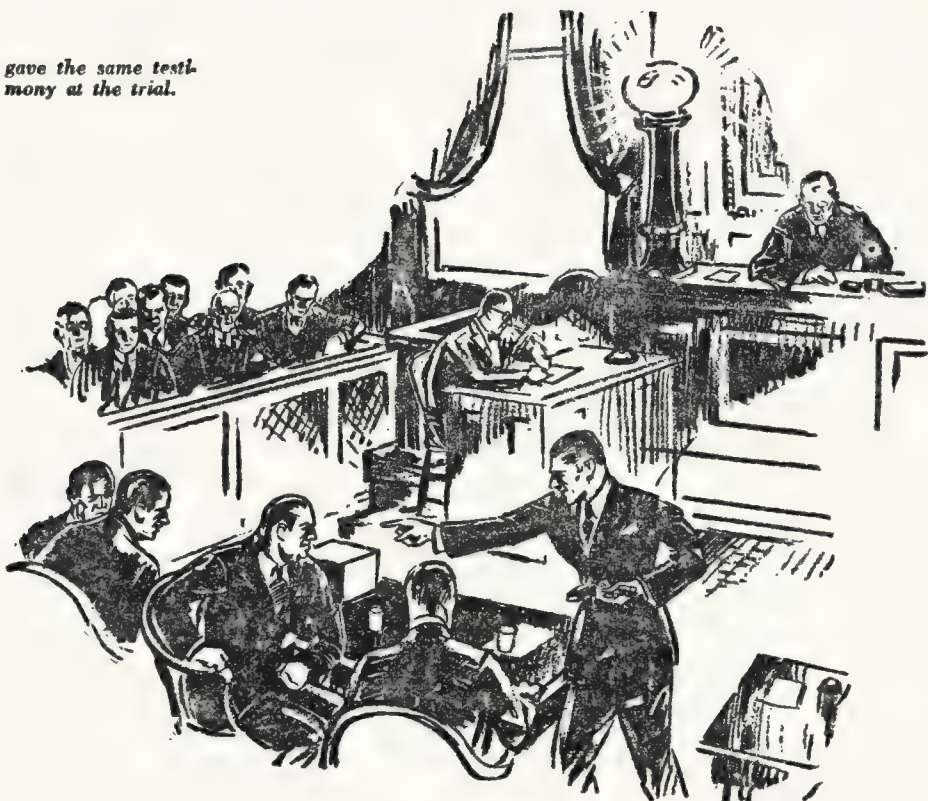
Eva winked at the newsmen, turned to Banning, and spoke in a low tone so the others couldn't hear. "I'm pretty enough to charm any dozen men and lead them around by the nose, Jim Banning, and I'm going to charm you. First, I'm going to kiss you, and won't that make a nice picture for the papers?"

Banning blanched and tried to shrink away.

Eva grinned impishly and added, "I will if you don't smile for the picture."

Banning smiled.

I gave the same testimony at the trial.



Crime Ain't My Business

By Ralph Berard

|| All this hobo wanted was enough dough to ride the luxury coach from Seattle to Los Angeles. But to get that dough he had to uncork a murder and blackmail the police department. ||

ME, Bo Walker, I crawled from a side-door Pullman this rainy October morning in the Seattle freight yards, wet, cold and stiff. I wouldn't have been a bit interested in any gun moll's story about her boy friend bumping himself off in a cheap rooming house on Harrington Street even if I'd heard about it. Nor did I plan to blackmail any police department.

Crime ain't my business. In fact, I guess no other guy makes a living the way I do.

I was broke, and California is warmer in winter. Seattle to L. A., luxury coach was \$26.80, and that's how I hankered to ride for a change.

So, like I always do in a new town, I brushed my duds, walked up to the passenger station, slid into a pay telephone booth and took a gander through the directory. I picked the ABC Collection Agency because it was the first in classified, and fifteen minutes later, at exactly nine-fifteen, I was inside 918 Third National Bank Building talking to a slim, middle-

aged, hawk-beaked guy who I immediately suspected would be harder to collect collections from than any ordinary deadbeat. He gave me the kind of look I always get, unfavorable.

I look like hell; that's a fact. Crying babies get scared to silence when I look tough, and certain kinds of women scream. I'm forty, an ex-pug. My nose's been busted twice, and a cut under my right lamp makes it look slightly cocked though it actually ain't. I looked my pleasantest at this clunk-headed office manager and inquired gently, "Got any tough accounts you want collected?"

He seemed surprised to hear me talking business like that. Then he edged closer, interested. "What do you mean?" He used a voice like a hungry baby robin squeaking for worms.

"I just want tough ones," I told him. Ones you've given up. I bring you fifty per cent and keep fifty."

Any experienced collector can tell by looking at me that I might make a producer. And this guy, his name was Robberns (I never learned why the last two letters) had an eye for business. "How do you work?" he wanted to know.

I told him: "When I locate the right guy I lay down the bill in front of his nose and look tough. 'Do you owe this money?' I demand, then I look tougher. He looks at me and gets scared. He generally croaks weakly, 'Why ye—yes I g—guess I owe it.' Then I look still tougher and say, 'I'll be back at ten in the morning, you better have the cash.' I look at him still tougher for half a second, then whirl on my heel and leave. By the next A. M. he's generally so scared he's stolen or borrowed the dough. I bring you your half and keep my own."

Robberns's eyes sparkled. Guys like him generally appreciate my technique. "What if he *doesn't* get the money?" he asked.

I shrugged and grinned. "I just pick up his bill and walk out without letting myself in for anything illegal like punching anybody. There's too

many soft guys to work on and I ain't hurt your chances any by giving this bird a scare."

Robberns pondered. A slitted look came into his ratty eyes that seemed too damn cunning, then he smiled, also too cunning. "I'll try you on one account," he suggested, "a tough one."

"Sure," I agreed. They always start me on a tough one.

Robberns kept smiling like the baby robin swallowing its first worm when he turned and walked to a file. A moment later he came back and spread a bill for ten-eighty on the counter. "This is a tough one," he admitted. "If you collect it, come back and I'll give you some better ones."

I LOOKED at the statement, then I looked at him. The ten-eighty was owed to one of the biggest firms in town. I knew they had their own collection department and they wouldn't turn anything over to ABC without a special reason. "What's the matter with it?" I asked. "I smell something."

"You asked for something tough," he said.

That's a fact. I ask for 'em tough and I'm used to 'em. But I'd never run into dead people chasing a bill before, so I said, "Okey; I'll bring in the dough," and went out with the bill.

It brought me to the place on Harrington Street, a two-dollar-a-week dump; a two-story frame that had been painted so long ago it just looked dirty. One small window on the second floor, perhaps in a lavatory, was broken. I went up four soggy, half rotted steps. It was still raining and cold and miserable. I pushed my way into a smelly hallway.

The ten-eighty bill was made out to Mrs. Jane Pruner who turned out to be the landlady, first two-by-four room to my right. I tapped and she opened the door immediately.

You're at a disadvantage when the debtor is a woman. You can't threaten to punch them in the nose and they don't scare as easy as men, except sometimes at my looks, then they're

more likely to slam the door than to fork over any dough. This one, though, grinned, opened the door wider, shifted her big hulk to one side and invited me in. You couldn't tell how old she was but she was about as clean as the joint she ran and almost as big. "What can I do for you, my man?"

Her voice squeaked, but certainly not like a robin, and her eyes and crooked sharp beak came near scaring even me. "You're Mrs. Pruner?" I asked.

"That's me." She shoved the door shut, removed a pile of dirty clothes from a chair and motioned me into it. "So what?"

"Do you owe this?" I demanded, and showed her the bill.

She grinned and showed a few teeth, shook her head negatively. "I figure Mrs. Jugvale's got to pay that, or maybe Mr. Jugvale."

"It's made out to you," I insisted.

"Everything the tenants use gets made out to me. But I ain't paying for anything I don't use myself. Best I can do is tell you how it happened."

I frowned. "How what happened?"

She grinned wide enough to show an additional tooth and started off on a gruesome yarn which she seemed to enjoy telling immensely. "The Jugvale's rented Number Six upstairs about a month ago," she related. "At first I thought they wasn't married, then when this young punk started coming every week or so to see Mrs. Jugvale after her husband went to work, I decided they was married all right. The cops said the young punk's name was Milt. I met him in the hall two or three times, always pretty drunk. Once I asked him if he lived here and he said, no, he just came to see a friend."

I sat back and let the landlady talk. She was the kind that likes to, and she might tell me something worth knowing.

"Mr. Jugvale is a quiet, hard-working man. I think he'd like to get a divorce but he's afraid she'd get alimony and attach his wages." A

note of sympathy entered the landlady's hard voice. "I feel sorry for 'em both. She really loves him but she just ain't his sort. I don't believe she'd ever attach his wages."

"He's the guy that's supposed to pay this bill?" I asked.

"I'm trying to tell you," she snapped back, then continued: "The night it happened I noticed particularly how very quiet everything was around the place. I wasn't waked once in the whole night. Then about eight in the morning I heard Mrs. Jugvale scream at the head of the stairs. I rushed up and she grabbed my arm. 'There's a dead man in my room,' she sputtered and I blinked and told her she must be crazy.

"But she wasn't. She dragged me to the door and there lay the young punk just inside. There was a carpet of cigarette stubs around 'im and some loose rags that he'd apparently stuffed under the door. They'd been pushed back when Mrs. Jugvale opened it. 'I shut off the gas,' she told me. 'He had all the burners opened up full.'

"I'll call the police," I told her. But she grabbed my arm. 'You mustn't,' she said. 'You mustn't do that.' So I asked her if she thought we should stuff the body in a garbage can out in the alley. Then she realized we had to do something. I asked her if she knew the guy and she said, no, which I knew was a lie.

"So I called the police. In ten minutes a prowler came and an ambulance. I went upstairs with the two cops and opened the door again. The gas wasn't so bad by then but you could still smell it. One cop looked at the punk and touched him with his toe. Then we saw the penciled writing on the wallpaper just above the dead guy's head. It read:

I can't stand to think of being without you.

MILTY

"The cop said, 'The poor sap!' and the other cop said, 'Is he dead?' Smart guys, coppers."

This buxom landlady woman

warmed to her subject like a steam calliope. She was filled up with it like bad whiskey and gave me the details with gestures and exclamations.

"Mrs. Jugvale admitted to the cops that she knew the guy. She said she'd been out all night, ever since her husband had left at seven. While she was standing there talking with the cops her husband came home and saw them carrying out the body. He just looked at it and looked at his wife and said in a dazed kind of way, 'I never suspected another man was the trouble.'

"Mrs. Jugvale sat down, covered her face with her hands and started to cry. In spite of the way things looked I couldn't believe she'd really been double-crossing her husband."

"So I have to collect from Jugvale, huh?" I interceded.

"Either from him or from her." She stood up and opened the hall door. "I guess he's up there now. But likely he's asleep. He works nights."

I LFET the talkative landlady, went up to Number Six and hammered on the door. There was still a smell in the narrow hall. I guess it was just mustiness but you could sure imagine it was gas. I was cheered a bit at the prospect of talking to a man for a change. But when he opened the door my cheerfulness fell away.

Jugvale was about thirty, not such a bad-looking guy. But he had a frame and size and bulging muscles that would have enabled him to take me on even in the days when I was good. Nevertheless I stuck out the bill. "Owe this?" I demanded.

He was in his pajamas, had been asleep. He blinked once or twice, took the bill in his hand and managed to read it. Then you should have heard him. He reached out, grabbed my shoulder, and pulled me inside like a long lost brother. I thought he had suddenly gone nuts.

He showed me the handwriting still on the wall:

I can't stand to think of being without you.

MILLY

Then he showed me the gas stove, turned on all the jets and turned them off again. He showed me how the cracks around the windows had been stuffed with rags and he kept laughing like he was out of his head. "Collect that damn bill from my wife," he cackled, "and if you make it tough enough to get me rid of her I'll give you a ten dollar bonus." But this guy wasn't fooling me any. I could tell he was busted up over what had happened and was trying to hide it.

There wasn't any chance of scaring him. I didn't like the thought of riding side-door Pullman to L. A. and I could still hear the Oregon Mist hammering on the Washington Cedar shingles of that rooming house roof. That's the only reason I didn't give up. "When'll the lady be home?" I asked Jugvale.

"Hell, she's no lady," he cackled and I grinned to encourage him in thinking it was an appropriate joke. The guy was suffering, suffering and bluffing himself. "When'll she be home?" I repeated.

He shrugged. "Most anytime after I go to work. Try about eight."

So I went out and at eight I came back. I tapped on Number Six again and a low quivery woman's voice said, "Who's there?"

I pulled my voice down low. "Friend of yours."

"Who?" She sounded puzzled, somewhat angry and quite despondent.

"Guess," I suggested.

She wasn't the kind that scares easy and finally curiosity overcame her. She unlatched the door to peek out. I shoved it open quickly and went in.

She was really quite small, and not bad looking. I stuck the bill under her tilted nose. "I'm here to collect," I announced. "I guess you know what I mean."

She gulped, and hardly glanced at the bill. She just kept staring at me, a wild hysterical look in her eyes. "I can't pay anything tonight," she said. Her face had turned ghastly. She was scared now.

I had stepped toward the gas stove. Now I spun around, surprised. She was admitting she would pay. Then I noticed the red fingernail polish on the fingers that were still holding the bill. It came to me suddenly that I'd seen something red like that around the handles of the gas stove. I took the bill from her. "You'll have to have some money by ten in the morning," I said flatly. I didn't realize then that she could be thinking of a different kind of payment than I was thinking of.

She sat down and I kept looking at her. There was a strange expression in her eyes that made me feel creepy. I kept thinking of that red fingernail polish and the red stuff I'd seen on the stove. Also I was thinking of a first class railroad ticket to L. A. and a guy who does my kind of work uses every straw he can clutch at. "If you have the money when I come at ten in the morning I won't tell," I said.

When her faded blue eyes met mine they were filled with terror. "Tell what?" She just breathed the words.

"You were clumsy," I said. "You just got away with it because the police are too smart to be dumb. They expect suicides in dumps like this. They can't understand people doing things as clumsy as you did so they didn't even look. I pointed to the handwriting on the wall. "That's your handwriting," I said, "not the dead man's. You love your husband but you were willing to put that there and hope you could make him believe some wild story rather than let him learn the truth." I walked to the window where some rags still were stuffed in the cracks, "and your fingerprints will be found all over these rags."

I was just bluffing. I stooped over to pick up a strip of red cloth near the window. I didn't even realize she had stood up. Then the flatiron hit me right back of the ear.

IF you ever did much fighting, you know about being out on your feet. Your body keeps going after your

mind's gone blank. But there's also something just the opposite—a coma. You know what goes on but you're helpless, you can't move.

I hit the floor, not out cold, but like you are in a coma. Mrs. Jugvale got hysterical. She stood over me shouting, "Didn't Milty Petrott blackmail me enough, the drunken little slob? Sure, I killed him; I'm glad I killed him. I had to keep him from telling Bill I'd been mixed up with racketeers and gunmen."

She was sobbing, in anguish and sheer desperation. "When I met Archie Carpit, I didn't know he was a gangster. I'd had too much to drink, I made a mistake. And now that Carpit's in jail all you little hoodlums that can't make a living without him follow each other up and try to steal what little happiness a girl might find. I never saw you, I don't know how you found out I killed Milty. But I paid Milty plenty. I'll never pay you a cent. I'll kill you too."

The room swayed about me crazily. Her words sounded like soup boiling in some distant kettle. They made a sound that had meaning. But, in my mind, it wasn't in any definite form.

I tried to move my little finger. I put my entire mental and physical force into the effort. But it wouldn't move. I stopped listening to the woman's crazy ranting. But I kept hearing it. I found myself feeling sorry for her, then, realizing, damn it, it was my business to collect ten-eighths. Then I was realizing she had taken me for some second member of some racketeer's gang. Me, Bo Walker, I was to be the second dead man.

These things all got in my mind at one time, each thought separate from the others, and at the same time all jumbled up with them. Then I passed out entirely.

I came to lying on the floor. I hadn't been out long because I could smell the gas. I was too scared at first to realize the gas hadn't been on long enough to do any harm or I wouldn't have woke up at all. I raised on my

elbow and pounded my fist through the window glass. After taking a big whiff of fresh air, I crawled back to the stove and got it turned off. I found the light switch and snapped it and saw how she had stuffed rags under the door and in the window cracks again. I also found the unlatched rear window where she had crawled out. I could picture how she had planned to come back in the morning and scream again at the head of the stairs. I could picture, I mean, how she would have done it if the flatiron blow had been as hard as she thought it had been.

I got out of there and onto the street. It had stopped raining and was foggy. Milky white patches of mist floated around the street lamps like ghosts serenading in a graveyard. I got a glimpse of a clock in a corner grocery. It was nine o'clock. The cold was getting into my veins and I began thinking of California and the \$26.80 to L. A. So I inquired where the police station was and went there.

THE Public Safety Building is a nice warm place on a foggy night. I walked through the halls slowly, finally finding the detective division and getting hold of a smart-looking dick named Carlson. He gave me the same reception everybody does—bad. But I got plenty of nerve. "I want to talk about a murder," I told him. Then I insisted on making him listen to what had happened, "And," I said, "I want to get to L. A. out of this damn rain. It ought to be worth something to the police to clean up a murder like this."

He laughed at me. "You haven't discovered any murder. You're just talking, trying to bluff me into a hand-out or maybe you think I'll take up a collection to get you to L. A. Well, I wish you was there but your novel little scheme won't work around here. I ought to put you in the jug to cool off."

I stood up, mad. A guy in my business never misses any bets. "If you don't want to solve this case I know

a guy who will." I turned on my heel and moved doorwards, getting angrier.

His voice sounded behind me. "Wait, you, just a minute. What do you mean by that last crack?"

I turned. "Ever hear of the newspapers?"

He got me sitting down again. "What's your idea?" he asked.

I gave him both barrels. "Trouble with you cops," I said, "is that you can't realize how some women really fight for happiness. I'll bet this Mrs. Jugvale is nuts about that husband of hers. It's a shame she can't have a little happiness." I stopped, a little startled at my own eloquence which is a big word for me. Then I steadied myself. "But after all," I shrugged, "murder is murder and I've got to collect \$10.80. This guy she killed kept threatening to tell her husband, so she got him so drunk he passed out, then she turned on the gas and went out the back door. In the morning she came back and screamed. She was going to do the same with me."

"She'd sure have saved us trouble if she had," he sneered at me.

Then he stepped out and called in a guy named Riley, a big heavy Irishman with bushy gray eyebrows and quite a sense of sarcastic humor. I had to start my story over and they both listened to me as if it was a dull night anyway and they needed the entertainment. Then Riley said, "You ought to write fiction, bum." He leaned over the table on his elbow and stared half way through me. "By the way, ain't I seen you around the freight yards before this season?"

Carlson said, "We're not finishing any free meals or beds for bums this year just because they think they're sleuths."

Riley laughed as if he thought that was funny and added, "We checked that rooming house suicide plenty close and your standing in town ain't nothing to make us change our minds."

Carlson laughed at that. They were

like a pair of end men at a minstrel show, laughing at each other's bad gags. Then they got serious and nearly tossed me out on my head.

I went out of there mad as the devil. At eight P. M. I was back in the Harrinston Street rooming house tapping on Number Six again. I'd been doing a lot of thinking. I'd been thinking about Mrs. Jugvale and how miserable those gangsters must have made life for her. What was wrong, I began to wonder, with killing a gangster anyway? The cops did it themselves when it was necessary. And, in Mrs. Jugvale's case, it began to look plenty necessary.

Mrs. Jugvale was dumb enough to be home as I'd hoped she would be. I could tell she was scared when she heard my voice through the door.

"Might as well let me in," I said. "That's better than letting me spill what I know."

So she let me in and I watched every move she made. I didn't want any flatirons coming down on my ear. But it seemed, somehow, like some change had taken place in her, as if she'd been thinking and crying a lot. I grinned as pleasantly as I could and really tried to be friendly. "Listen, kid," I said. "I don't give a damn if you bumped your boy friend and I ain't mad because you tried to bump me. This is just a plain business proposition with me, nothing like you must have thought last night. I just want to collect this." I showed her the bill again. "I bet you got enough dough hidden right here in the room some place to pay it."

For the briefest second a light of hope came into those faded blue eyes of hers. Then it faded. "I'll pay the bill," she said dully. Some kind of transformation seemed to come into her pale face that brought back a lot of her youth and beauty.

She had the money in a sock. I was saying, "I won't say anything to anyone about what's happened. All I want is to collect this bill so the collection

agency will have enough confidence to give me some more."

She gave me a ten and a one. I told her I didn't have twenty cents and she said to forget it. I receipted the bill and handed it back to her. She said, smiling wanly, "You were wrong about the fingernail polish on the stove. The handles were painted red once but the stove is so old the paint has about worn off. I bet you were only bluffing when you first accused me of k-k-killing him." She choked up suddenly and began to cry. "I didn't want to kill anybody," she sobbed. "Honest, I didn't. I'm glad I didn't kill you. They had tormented me till I was a nervous wreck. I didn't know what I was doing." She was getting a trifle hysterical.

JUST then the door clicked and her husband came in. I was standing there with one hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her. I was also wondering what was getting into me and I said to Jugvale, "You got a fine little wife here. You must never believe evil of her."

There I stood, talking like a preacher. Jugvale was a big husky bulk in the doorway. His mouth dropped open a trifle and he drew down his brows questioningly. "What do you know about my wife?" he growled.

Right then I had a great inspiration. I moved my benevolent right hand from Mrs. Jugvale's shoulder to her husband's and I put on the kindest expression my busted features are able to absorb. "I'm a man of God," I said slowly. "Your wife can't tell the details about the unfortunate fellow who killed himself because doing so would involve an innocent party. You mustn't ask her about it."

Mrs. Jugvale smiled understandingly at me when I said that. A little groove came in her forehead which puzzled me. Jugvale's questioning expression deepened. He looked from me to his wife and I could see by his face he was going to stand by her whatever happened. She took a step to-

ward me and actually took hold of my hand. "Don't try to shield me," she said pitifully. "I'm going to the police and tell them."

The miserable little woman turned, trying hard to control her feelings, and picked up a small round hat, one that looked like a tiny bird's nest. Jugvale was still staring at each of us by turns when an authoritative rap sounded on the hall door.

Jugvale hesitated a moment, then opened it and the two cops, Riley and Carlson, came in. I guess they must have been watching the place. They saw Jugvale come in and likely already knew I was inside. Riley's glance came to rest on me. "Maybe," he said, "we were a little hard on you, bum. After all, it's our duty to check on things like the story you told us."

Before I could answer, Mrs. Jugvale moved very quietly toward the door, her lips set tight together, her features drawn and pale. But her voice, though it was awful low, was firm and mighty determined. "There is nothing to check, officer. I killed a man. I'm willing to go with you and tell you about it."

I don't know who was more surprised—Jugvale, the cops, or me. They took her, of course, and me and Jugvale, too, as material witnesses.

The next day, after a lot of questions and legal red tape like you never get in the collection business, they got enough dope on me to make sure I'd be around for the trial.

I called on Robberns and gave him his half of the \$10.80. "This is the first time I ever collected a bill for the gas that killed a guy," I told him. "Even with all the burners of a gas stove turned on full blast from seven P. M. till eight in the morning your rates must be a lot too high when it costs that much to croak yourself."

Robberns looked at me with disbelief in his rat-like eyes. "You mean you actually collected that gas bill?"

"Uhuh," I admitted, "and now I want some more accounts. I got a new system of collecting money."

He seemed to have a hard time believing I'd actually got that money. "What's your new system?" he asked.

I was surprised at myself again right then. I start preaching at that hard-faced, heartless bill-grabber. "Everybody's got some good in them," I said, "if a collector would only make an effort to bring it out and give the other guy a break."

I FOUND myself talking about that same way as a witness at Mrs. Jugvale's trial.

Her attorney, the one the state appointed to defend her, proved the gangster she'd killed was wanted for three murders himself and that there had been a reward for him. The attorney got the charge against her reduced somehow to second degree murder because he said the way she'd been blackmailed and had her happiness stolen caused her to kill him in self-defense.

Nobody even objected to that. We all wished she'd go free.

Of course, that couldn't happen. But it almost did. They gave her some kind of sentence with a parole recommendation. I saw her last just as the trial ended. Jugvale had his arm around her, telling her he understood, that he'd wait for her, and save some money and they'd start over again.

Riley overheard their conversation and told Jugvale, "She'll be back almost right away, fellow."

Then the big officer turned to me and grinned, "You got enough in witness fees for that ticket to Los Angeles, didn't you, bum?"

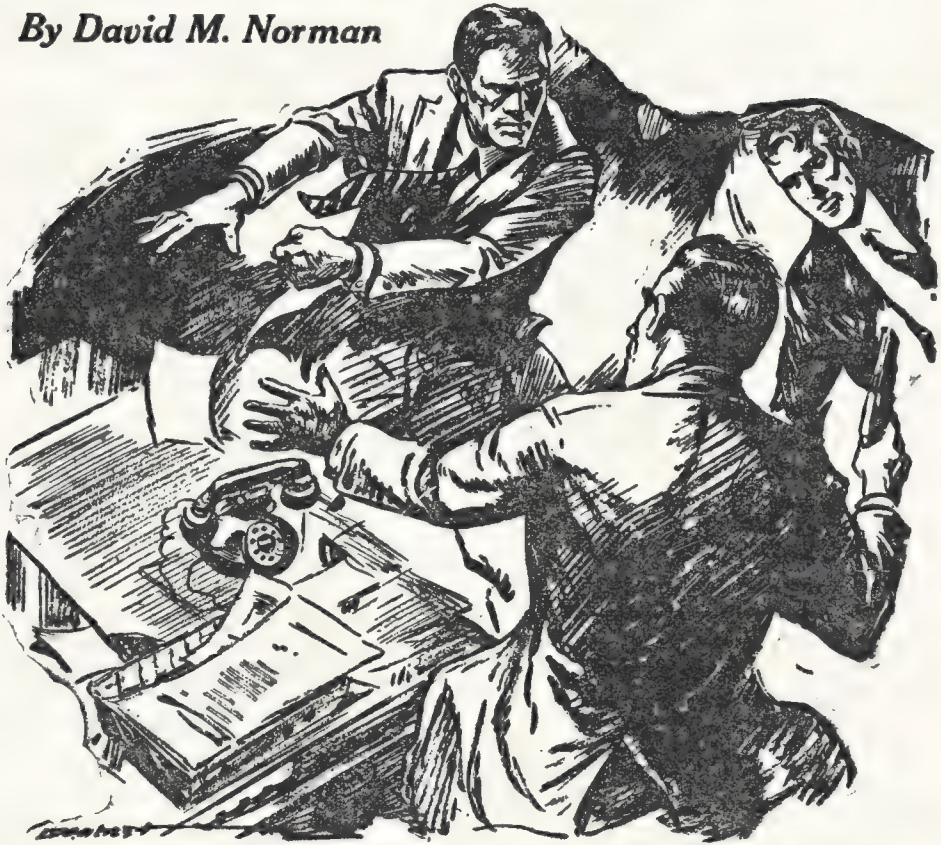
"I made a lot more than that on collections while I was waiting," I told him. "I got a new system."

And, that's right. I have a new system of living. The good that came out in that little woman, and seeing her get a fair trial like she did, had an effect on me, I guess. I never threaten to sock anybody any more. And I collect more money than I ever did before.

Robberns can't understand it.

Mr. Corpse Calling

By David M. Norman



Jim Abbott, D. A., had just returned from seeing the remains of his predecessor in his coffin. But now the dead man was phoning him, giving him information from the grave. And, to solve the mystery of the corpse that wouldn't stay dead, Abbott himself had to cross-examine the Grim Reaper.

THEY were all there to honor Jim Abbott, the new district attorney. Fifty odd men and women who had helped elect him, attended the banquet. There were speeches, toasts. Jim Abbott, who looked much too young for the office he'd won, responded to them all.

A grizzle-faced old Common Pleas Court judge really indicated just how everyone felt.

"Now, with Jim Abbott in charge of criminal prosecutions, we may expect speedier trials, fewer *nolles* and a little more hard work from the district attorney's office. Jim Abbott replaced Ralph Hamilton because Hamilton didn't have what it takes to be a good D. A."

There was more—lots of it. Then someone opened the door and walked up behind Abbott's chair. A waiter

spoke very softly, very deferentially.

"We did not wish to bother you, sir, but there is a phone call. Very urgent, sir."

Abbott threw down his napkin, excused himself and went out. He walked down the long corridor of the exclusive club, stepped into a phone booth indicated by the waiter, and picked up the receiver.

A girl's voice spoke. "Mr. Abbott? Just a moment, please, Mr. Ralph Hamilton is calling."

Hamilton! Abbott frowned. What did Hamilton, who had lost the election want now? At this time of night? Hamilton's voice came on, speaking plainly, slowly, but without much pause.

"Congratulations, Jim. Don't bother to talk, just listen. I want you to come to 29 Carmody Avenue immediately. Now I said not to ask questions. Just get there as fast as possible. Believe me, it's important for your future. Good-by."

There was a click. Abbott hung up slowly and grunted in exasperation. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have paid any attention to a message like this, but Hamilton's voice had been so compelling. Abbott shrugged, asked for his hat and sent word to the chairman of the banquet group that he would return soon.

Abbott's car was out front, and he drove it toward Carmody Avenue, a teeming business section, not very far off. He kept wondering what in the world Hamilton wanted. They weren't exactly enemies, but Hamilton had certainly not spared him during the campaign.

HAMILTON had been fighting with his back against the wall, knew it and used every trick known to politics. But Abbott had won because every thoughtful voter knew a change in the D. A.'s office had become necessary.

Abbott found 29 Carmody Avenue, braked and pulled to the curb in front of the next dwelling. He peered out.

There was the proper number, faintly illuminated. There was a dimout here and all curtains were drawn. It was a big, imposing place. Abbott walked up the porch steps and then gasped. There was a sign—blacked out now—but visible from a short distance. This place was a funeral home.

Abbott frowned. Why had Hamilton urged him to come here? Perhaps someone was dead—a suspicious case, and Hamilton wanted to throw the whole thing into Abbott's lap. That would be just about his speed. Abbott punched a bell beside the door.

A tall man dressed in black admitted him. Abbott stepped into the hallway and got the odor of flowers. An everlasting odor here, perhaps.

"I came to see Mr. Ralph Hamilton," he said. "Is he here?"

"Yes, he is here. This way, please."

Abbott walked past several funeral rooms, a small chapel and then down a dim corridor. The undertaker opened a door. Abbott stepped into a room with tiled floor and walls. He gave a surprised start. In the center of the room was a table and on it lay a form covered with a sheet.

The undertaker walked over to it, looked up at Abbott and spoke in an apologetic voice.

"Of course we did not expect anyone to see him tonight. You—ah—may need rather a strong stomach—"

"Hey, wait a minute," Abbott cried. "Are you trying to tell me that is Ralph Hamilton?"

"That *was* Ralph Hamilton," the undertaker corrected mildly. "Of course, you knew he was dead. I—oh now, I'm beginning to understand. I recognize you, Mr. Abbott. The new district attorney, isn't it? Of course. Mr. Hamilton fell or jumped from the twenty-first story window—his office window.

"The police indicated it was suicide. Perhaps because he lost the election to you. Naturally, they didn't inform you about the affair because you were being honored by a banquet to-

night. Then someone did tell you—and you misunderstood.”

“Misunderstood, my eye,” Abbott said. “Hamilton himself phoned me not more than fifteen minutes ago and asked me to meet him here.”

The undertaker lifted a corner of the sheet. “Did you think he phoned you fifteen minutes ago, Mr. Abbott?”

Abbott gulped and turned away. No question about it—Ralph Hamilton was dead. He was a man of outstanding features and there could be no mistake.

“How long has he been here?” Abbott asked.

“We brought him here an hour ago. He jumped at eight o’clock or shortly after that. So you see he certainly could not have phoned you.”

“Yes,” Abbott said slowly, “he certainly could not have—and yet, he did. I recognized his voice. Listen—forget about my coming here. I’ve an idea this may be a horrible trick of some kind. I—I’ll go now and thanks.”

ABBOTT’S face was grim and somewhat pale as he drove his car to Ralph Hamilton’s offices in the County Building. Abbott’s offices now because he’d be expected to take over at once with Hamilton dead. He kept hearing the dead man’s voice drumming in his ears. That phone call couldn’t have been faked. He’d listened to Hamilton’s voice many, many times during the campaign, followed his speeches over the radio, in meeting halls. He’d often met the man face to face in court.

Abbott took an elevator to the twenty-first floor, stepped out and advanced toward a door marked *DISTRICT ATTORNEY*. Light shone through the opaque panel. He opened the door and walked in. The outer office was empty, but a pretty girl, with eyes red from weeping, came from an inner office.

“My name is Jim Abbott. I came for some information.”

“Yes, Mr. Abbott,” the girl said. “Won’t you come in? After all, this

will be your office tomorrow. I’m Florence Walker. I—used to be Mr. Hamilton’s secretary.”

“Good,” Abbott said. “You may prove very useful to me. Now I want to know about Hamilton’s death. What happened?”

She shuddered and sat down in front of the dead man’s desk. Abbott occupied the big leather chair of his predecessor.

“I’m not sure,” the girl said. “Naturally, Mr. Hamilton was cleaning up the office in preparation to vacating it. He was in an office down the hall. The next thing I knew, the police came in and told me he was dead.”

Abbott arose and walked to a large window with a rather low base. It was wide open.

“This one?” he asked pointedly.

She nodded. “Yes, that one. They insinuate he jumped, but I refuse to believe it. He fell.”

Abbott sat down again and pointed to a large pile of legal papers. The girl picked them up carefully.

“Just routine business,” she explained. “I took them out of the safe. I would like to go to my own office. These things must be sorted and it’s getting very late.”

“Go ahead,” Abbott said. “I’ll just relax here a few minutes and get the feel of the place.”

Two seconds after she was gone, Abbott did get the feel of the office. It seemed to be closing in on him. It seemed as though a dead man lingered here, trying to make himself seen and heard. Abbott shivered and decided he’d like it better by daylight.

The door opened and the girl looked in. “There’s a phone call for you, Mr. Abbott. It came through the switchboard. Will you take it?”

Abbott picked up the phone and held his breath. Not a soul knew he was here. There was a click, as if the secretary had switched him on. Then Abbott felt the short hairs at the nape of his neck rise. The same voice spoke. The voice of Ralph Hamilton, who was dead.

"Hello, Jim," he said. "I haven't much time, so just listen. Your first duty is to find out who murdered me. I don't know for sure, but two men are the most likely suspects. Two crooks named Arnt and McBain. They hate each other like poison, but they'll hate you worse. You think I'm dead, don't you? I'm not—entirely. A man just doesn't give up even when death strikes. I must have my vengeance, Jim. It's up to you to help me. Get Arnt and McBain to the office. Make them talk. One knows the answer. Good-by—for now."

THE new D.A. felt rather than heard someone standing just inside the door. He looked up with haggard eyes. It was only Florence Walker, and he sensed that she'd been standing there for several seconds.

"Mr. Abbott," she said. "What's wrong? Are you ill?"

"Maybe I'm crazy," Abbott said. "Tell me, did you recognize the voice that came over the wire just now?"

"Why no—or perhaps it was a bit familiar. Something has happened, Mr. Abbott. May I be of assistance?"

Abbott didn't answer. He picked up the phone and contacted a telephone supervisor. He identified himself and asked to have any calls made to the D. A.'s office within the last ten minutes. He got his answer in two or three minutes.

"Sorry, Mr. Abbott. No calls were put through to your office that we know of. Your number is handled on a special circuit, and even if it was dialed, we'd know. There were no calls, sir."

Abbott hung up and leaned back. This was getting beyond him. A ghost voice saying Hamilton had probably been murdered, even giving him the names of the killers. Abbott knew them both—Arnt and McBain. They'd practically run every crooked, scheming racket in town for six years. One took the north side of the tracks, the other the south. They never invaded each other's territory, for such an act

would have caused instant warfare. They'd dabbled in it years ago.

Abbott poured himself a drink from a thermos on the desk, swallowed it in one gulp and then arose. He heard footsteps outside the office. A man came in—with a gun in his fist. A second thug followed, also armed.

"Just sit down, pal," the shorter of the pair snapped. "Keep your paws on top of the desk and just answer one question. Can you open that safe?"

"No," Abbott said and broke out in a cold sweat. If these men were after something in that safe, then Florence Walker must have it in her office.

"Joe," the short man said, "go take a look around the rest of this layout."

"I'm all alone here," Abbott said quickly, and he realized that neither of these two men recognized him. The tall man departed just the same and began to search all the offices.

The short crook sat down on a corner of the desk. His gun was pointed directly at Abbott's head.

"Just who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm one of the junior attorneys, that's all. I had some overtime so I thought I'd find out what it was like to sit at the boss' desk, that's all."

"Yeah." The thug wrinkled his nose. "Now get over there and open the safe, you hear me?"

Before Abbott could refuse, the taller man came back and reported all the offices were empty. The short thug signaled. His pal walked around the desk, grasped Abbott's neck in a mighty grip and began methodically to bang his forehead against the edge of the desk.

"When you're ready to open the safe, pal," the short crook said, "my friend will stop bashing your brains out—if you got any."

"I can't open the safe," Abbott cried. "I swear I can't."

The torture ceased instantly and the tall man cursed. He removed his coat, walked up to the safe and started to manipulate the dial. He kept this up for half an hour while Abbott stared into the muzzle of a gun and

wondered if his term of office was going to end before it began. His head ached badly and was filled with thoughts of a corpse on a slab. A corpse that would not remain dead, but phoned him—gave him information from the grave. Abbott shuddered and the short crook laughed gleefully, mistaking it for terror.

FINALLY the tall man got the safe door open. He threw the beam of a flashlight inside and then cursed again. The safe was empty. Both men slowly backed toward the door. The short one spoke in a harsh voice.

"Okay, wise guy. You stalled us here while somebody else got away with the stuff we were after. So you can do one of two things—either take a dry dive out the window or inhale a couple of slugs. You got ten seconds to make up your mind."

Abbott's brain cleared instantly. He arose, looked over his shoulder and then suddenly scooped up the thermos jug and hurled it. Both men ducked. Abbott was around the desk in a flash, heading for a door leading into another office. If it was locked, he was done. The door was even slightly ajar and he bolted head first through it.

He'd accomplished this in a split second, before the pair of killers could orient themselves. Now Abbott looked for another weapon, but gave up when he heard the outer office door slam shut. He tried to phone the lobby, but no one answered. He shrugged. A pair of mugs like those two would have entered by some other means.

He thought of Florence Walker and started looking for her. He opened supply closet doors, called her name. She was nowhere about and neither were those papers which she'd removed from the safe.

Abbott went back to Hamilton's office and used the phone. He called police headquarters and got the low-down on Arnt and McBain. They were rivals all right and ready to kill each other on sight. Hamilton, who lay dead on an undertaker's slab, wanted Ab-

bott to bring both these men to this office. Why? Abbott could no more figure out that angle than he could the method by which a dead man could phone him.

Yet dead or alive, Hamilton should know who had murdered him and he indicated it was one of this pair. That it had been murder was no longer doubtful in Abbott's mind. Those crooks had entered with the express purpose of getting evidence of some kind.

Then Abbott stewed about the girl. Why had she left so opportunely—and with the papers? Was she part and parcel of the mob, working here undercover? Perhaps she worked for McBain and the pair of killers were from Arnt's gang. Perhaps one of the crooks was trying to get enough on the other to put him away legally and rule the city alone.

"Rule the city," Abbott expressed his thoughts aloud. "The only rule here is going to be a legal one."

He jammed on his hat, winced as his swollen forehead protested by streaks of pain, and then set his jaws grimly. He walked out of the office, taking care to leave the main door unlocked. An elevator took him to the lobby and he reached his car without being stopped.

Abbott drove downtown, toward the regions where the underworld held sway. He wanted no assistance from anyone. In the first place, to get such aid, he'd have to tell about Hamilton's voice and they'd think he was crazy.

It wasn't midnight yet when he walked into a café jammed with people. This was known to be Arnt's headquarters and the place was just really getting started for the night. Abbott brushed aside a headwaiter, paid no attention to the coaxings of a check-room girl and walked to the rear of the place.

He saw two men lounging near a door and grabbed one by the lapels of his tuxedo. "My name is Jim Abbott, the new D. A. I want to see Arnt and right now. Or would you rather have

me come back with a wrecking crew?"

The thug made a derisive sound, but opened the door and led the way toward a narrow, steep staircase. He pushed a button on the wall and pointed upwards.

"The door at the head of the steps, pal. Arnt ain't afraid to see nobody—not even a young squirt of a D. A. Go on up."

THE door opened when Abbott was halfway up the steps. He kept on going. Two more hoodlums greeted him and Abbott knew that in some way word had been flashed of his coming and his identity. One of the thugs bowed low with a mocking grin. Abbott stepped into a lavishly furnished office and saw one of the two crime czars who ran the city.

Arnt was a wizen-faced, shrewd-eyed little bandit. He appraised Abbott swiftly and then arose with outstretched hand. Abbott paid no attention to the gesture. He walked to the desk and looked squarely at the crook.

"Well, well—" Arnt rubbed his hands—"Don't tell me the new D. A. is ready to do business? I thought we'd have to give you a period of breaking in."

"At the present moment," Abbott said icily, "I'm not interested in your rule over this part of the city. I'm much more interested in the possibility that you may be a murderer."

"A—what?" Arnt gasped, all the cockiness gone and the hand-rubbing changed to a tight clenching of the fingers.

"You heard me. Ralph Hamilton was killed tonight, only he isn't altogether dead. He told me, only a short time ago, to look you up, Arnt. Of course, you will have an alibi. But it's my business to break it, so go ahead and tell me why it was impossible to have killed Hamilton and been somewhere else at the same time."

"Hamilton—croaked?" Arnt gulped and sat down slowly. "He told you I did it? Honest, Abbott, I didn't. I haven't even got an alibi because I

don't know when the murder was committed. Say, maybe this is a rib. How can Hamilton tell you anything when he's dead?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that one," Abbott grunted. "Somebody called me on the phone and mentioned your name."

Arnt's eyes went hard. "McBain—sure, that's the answer. McBain is behind this. He killed Hamilton and he's trying to pin it on me. That's his way of muscling in. Well, it ain't going to work."

Abbott shrugged. "Your war with McBain means little to me until you boys begin shooting one another up. Then we'll keep the chair warm at the state prison. Arnt, I haven't enough on you to make an arrest, but so help me, you will go downtown on a suspicion-of-murder charge unless you show up at my office in exactly an hour and a half. That's one o'clock."

"We'll have a little talk there about McBain and yourself, too. One o'clock, Arnt. This gaudy place of yours isn't going to look very pretty if I have to send a squad down here to smoke you out."

Abbott turned and walked away. He descended the steps, brushed past the two gorillas at the bottom and strode through the dining room. No one made an effort to stop him. He had Arnt buffaloed.

McBain might be different. He wasn't as smart as Arnt and more given to having things out on the spot. Abbott wondered why the voice of a dead man had asked him to bring these two crooks together in the office. It didn't make much sense to him—unless. Hamilton knew these two men intimately enough to realize just what they'd do if confronted with each other.

That was it! Abbott turned a corner sharply, straightened out and saw headlights flash in his rear view mirror. He took another turn and the same car followed. Abbott began to feel quite uneasy. If Arnt's men were trailing him, they might have orders

to finish the case with bullets. Abbott decided he had to know who was in that car.

ABBOTT speeded up a bit, took another corner on two wheels and came to an abrupt stop. He leaped out of his car and got set. The pursuer shot around the corner, too, and had to slow up to make the sharp turn. Abbott raced toward the car, grabbed the door handle and swung onto the running board.

He had a glimpse of a pretty face that looked thoroughly frightened. It was Florence Walker, Hamilton's secretary. Abbott gave the door latch a yank. The door opened faster than he figured on, and at the same instant the car hit a slight depression in the road. Abbott went flying up and out. He fell and lay quiet for a moment or two, the wind knocked out of him. He saw the car come to a quick stop and begin to back up. He saw Florence's head stick out of a window.

Then Abbott managed to sit up. The car started off again and disappeared.

Abbott stood erect, carefully testing his limbs. There were no broken bones, but he had bruised himself in half a dozen places. He limped back to his own car, got aboard and turned around. At least no one would be following him from now on.

His mind went back to the pair of hoodlums who had opened the safe, to the papers they were after. The same ones which Florence had lifted and carried away most conveniently. Abbott hated to think of such a pretty girl involved with a bunch of lugs like Arnt and McBain, but it certainly looked as though she had an interest somewhere.

McBain had no such lavish headquarters as a café. He occupied an office on the same floor with a poolroom. Abbott was given curious glances as he walked between the tables, but nobody tried to stop him. He opened the door of McBain's office.

McBain looked up and then jumped to his feet. He was a burly man, crude

in appearance and manner. His little eyes grew narrow, but he gestured to a couple of hoodlums apparently assigned to guard him. They made no move to intercede.

"You're Abbott, the new D. A.," McBain said. "I don't want any trouble with you, Mister."

"You're already in it up to your neck," Abbott said flatly. "This time it's a murder case, McBain. Hamilton was killed tonight and things appear to indicate that you're it."

"Hamilton — bumped? Listen, I ain't been outa this office all night. You got nothing on me."

"We'll see," Abbott said. "I'm willing to give you one break. Be at my office shortly after one o'clock. That's little more than an hour from now. Don't show up—and alone, McBain—and I'll consider you ducked out because you are guilty."

"Arnt!" McBain yelled. "He put you up to this. Maybe he knocked off Hamilton."

"Maybe," Abbott conceded. "Be at my office and we'll iron it out. One-fifteen or so, McBain."

JUST before one o'clock, Abbott entered Hamilton's office. He left the door ajar, sat down at the murdered man's desk and waited. He kept his eyes glued to the telephone, half expecting it to ring.

At one sharp, Arnt arrived and sat down. Now he had an alibi all planned and proceeded to give it. Abbott knew how difficult it would be to break that alibi down.

"Sounds okay," he told Arnt, "but I heard something different. The man who accuses you is coming soon."

McBain swaggered into the office shortly. He stopped quickly and glared at Arnt. Then he looked over at Abbott.

"So I was right—this little rat did sing. You can't believe him, Abbott. He's been trying to frame me for years. Wants to take over the whole town. I—"

The phone buzzed. Abbott forgot

that two dangerous men faced him, forgot everything but the fact that this call must be coming from the grave. A corpse calling.

He lifted the receiver, glued it to his ear and heard that same familiar voice.

"You've done very well, Jim. No reason why you won't make an excellent D. A. Better than I at any rate. Now stop trying to talk and just listen. I can't spare much time. There are certain documents these two men are after. They'll kill each other to get them because those papers explain exactly how I protected these two men. How I took their bribes and their taunts. Ask them where those papers are. Good-by, Jim. This time for good, I'm afraid."

Abbott hung up slowly. "Believe it or not," he said, "that was Hamilton. He told me you men had bribed him, but that he prepared for something like this and made written statements. Those papers are missing. Two crooks came for them. Now—which one of you hyenas sent those lugs here?"

Arnt suddenly jumped to his feet and a gun appeared in his hand. He must have been hiding it under his hat. He stepped back slowly, gun covering McBain mostly. Arnt reached the wide open window and stood directly in front of it.

"I didn't send anybody," he snarled. "That means you, McBain. Well, I'm going to let you have it. I—"

Arnt suddenly doubled up. The gun dropped from his hand. He half turned and then fell. His feet still touched the floor, but his body hung over the window sill, head and arms dangling outside.

Abbott rushed toward him. So did McBain. There was a sharp click in the room. A voice—from the grave—boomed out a warning.

"That's how I was killed. Look out!"

Abbott whirled. McBain was bearing down with both arms outstretched. The moment Abbott would have tried to lift Arnt, McBain was prepared to

turn him out of the window. Abbott ducked under those arms, smashed a pair of hard blows to McBain's middle and then straightened him up with an uppercut. McBain crumpled.

Arnt had slipped back into the room and was trying to pick up his gun when Abbott landed on him. Arnt wasn't much to polish off. Abbott went to the phone and called headquarters. Then he picked up the gun and sat down.

DETECTIVES arrived. Abbott said, "Book these two for murder. Keep them apart, and if they should wake up on the way to a cell, pretend they are resisting arrest. Question them individually and tell each that the other is making murder accusations. They'll talk."

"And how they'll talk," a detective sergeant grunted. "These two been at each other's throats for years."

Abbott grinned. "Don't kid yourself. They've worked hand in glove and only pretended to be enemies. Take them away. I've got things to do."

When the office was cleared, Abbott turned to the inter-office annunciator on his desk. He spoke directly into it.

"Miss Walker, will you come in, please?"

Florence Walker, slightly pink, walked slowly into the office. Abbott smiled at her and indicated a chair.

"Let me guess how this was done," he suggested. "First of all, Hamilton knew he was done for. Beaten in the election he was of no more use to Arnt and McBain. He knew they'd try to wipe him out because he knew too much—so he prepared a series of recordings. They got me deeply interested in the case by summoning me to the funeral parlors. They gave me tips to pick up Arnt and McBain. One of that pair sent a couple of men here for Hamilton's papers which you conveniently smuggled out before they arrived."

"So far, Mr. District Attorney, you're perfectly right," Florence said.

"Good. Hamilton knew they'd try to

kill him in such a way as to resemble an accident. He didn't know how, but he was sure it would happen in his office. You played those records over the phone. That's why the call couldn't be traced. What I want to know is, how did Hamilton know those two monkeys would try to dump me out of the window? Arnt pretended to faint. Naturally, I'd have gone to help him and McBain was ready to push me out. They'd have vanished, and to all purposes another D. A. would have hit the sidewalk."

Florence said, "Hamilton made that last recording just in case. I followed you to make certain you were accepting the suggestions to bring both men here. I was in another office

when you returned, and I listened in through the annunciator. When I realized what was happening, I turned on the record and transmitted it through the annunciator.

"You see, Mr. Abbott, Hamilton wasn't all bad. They got him into this gradually—until he was up to his neck. What he didn't know, was that Arnt and McBain worked hand in glove all the time. Well, it's over now. One of that pair will crack. Will you excuse me now? I have to get some rest. Big day tomorrow—looking for a new job."

Abbott walked over and looked down at her. "You've got a job. You had it from the moment I walked into these offices."



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Slay Bells for Santa



By Edward W. Ludwig

★ ★ ★

It was curtains for Sam Conway, newshawk, if he didn't turn in a red-hot story for his city editor. But when Conway's nose for news made him the goat for a murder rap, his boss was all set to switch Conway's by-line into an obit item.

★ ★ ★

IT WASN'T Christmas. It wasn't even winter. To be exact, it was a hot evening in late July when Sam Conway shuffled down the third floor hallway of the MacArthur Hotel, his expression like something out of a funeral parlor.

He felt so low he didn't even notice the eye-satisfying blonde that strutted ahead of him. All he could think of was what old Monkey-Nose, his city

ed, had told him that afternoon:

"Listen, dopey, I don't care if you are going in the army next month. I want a story *now*—or you're through. Now get going—and stay away from dames!" The little man's cheeks puffed up and his face took on a greenish hue, as if he were preparing for a louder explosion. But Conway wisely grabbed his hat and left the office. If only he could turn in one good story—a damn good story—before next month.

Now he noticed the blonde. She was about five seven or eight and slender. Just his type. She stopped before the room opposite his, fumbled in her purse for her key. At any other time Conway would have acted more aggressively, but now he merely shot the girl an appraising glance and turned to his own door.

He had just inserted his key in the lock when the girl screamed. For a moment Conway figured it was none of his business. Then he heard the click-click of high heels as the girl rushed from her room. He whirled.

The blonde darted up to him, face ghostly white.

"A—*a Santa Claus*," she breathed through quivering lips. "A dead *Santa Claus* in my room."

Conway noticed first only that the girl's wide eyes were a beautiful brown. Then the meaning of her words entered his consciousness.

"*A Santa Claus?*" Puzzledly, he followed the girl back to her room. As he crossed over the threshold he blinked.

DRESSED in a *Santa Claus* costume, a man lay sprawled on the bed. His eyes stared glassily at the ceiling. A smear of crimson had crept through the red jacket and stained the lower portion of the white beard.

Frowning, Conway stepped to the bed, pulled the beard from the dead man's face. It was a middle-aged face, rather thin and narrow.

"Who is he—friend of yours?"

The blonde stood by the door, rubbing her forehead with the back of

her hand. "Never saw him before," she murmured. "Believe me, I don't know anything about this. I started to unlock my door and found it unlocked. And then when I switched on the light I found — him."

Conway pursed his lips.

"Now why in hell would anyone dress up as *Santa Claus* when the temperature's over a hundred? And why would he get knocked off in a strange girl's bedroom?" His eyes lit up. "Shades of *Nellie Bly*, this is a story!"

The girl stepped forward. "Don't you think we'd better call the police?"

Conway shrugged. "Lots of time for that. Take a look at that face again grease paint, rouge and lipstick. This guy took a lot of pains to be made up right. No ordinary guy playing *Santa* for his kids would do that. This fellow was serious about his disguise."

The girl suddenly knelt at the foot of the bed.

"Here's how it was done," she murmured.

"Hey! Mustn't touch." Conway scooped up the automatic in his handkerchief, laid it on the dresser. Then he noticed something under the dresser. It was a hollowed metal cylinder—a silencer. And it was still warm.

The reporter turned toward the girl.

"You're in a spot, sister—a murdered man in your room and only dead a few minutes before you found him."

The girl nodded. "I know. I—" Her hand shot to her forehead, and she started to sway.

Conway grabbed her around the shoulders, helped her to a chair.

"You'd better get some air—you need it."

The girl was breathing hard. "I'll be all right," she murmured. "I'll go downstairs and get the manager. He might be interested in this." Her words ended with a forced smile.

As the blonde stepped out of the room, Conway returned to the bed. He went through the pockets of the dead man, found a loaded, unfired

automatic, cigarettes, matches. Nothing more. No identification.

He scratched his head, then picked up the silencer and the fired automatic. The silencer fitted perfectly on the muzzle of the gun.

An ear-splitting scream sounded behind him. Gun in hand, he spun toward the door. A thin little maid stood horrified, mouth agape, eyes fastened to the thing on the bed. Her load of clean towels had fallen to the floor.

A FEW seconds later a little group stood huddled in the doorway—the trembling maid, a short bald-headed man, and an aristocratic looking woman who stared with an “I’m not surprised at anything in this hotel” air.

A mountain of a man barged into the room like a bowling ball, nearly knocked over the three onlookers. He whipped out a revolver as he saw Conway and the body.

“Hand over the gun, buddy,” he thundered. “You’d better not give me any trouble, see?”

Conway tried to seem composed as he handed over the automatic, but he could feel the blood pulsing through his temples.

“House dick?” he asked.

As the big man nodded savagely Conway sat down on the foot of the bed, proceeded to light a cigarette.

“You know,” he drawled, “you remind me of movie dicks — always ready to arrest somebody. Take it easy, fellow. I’m from the *Star*. Here’s my press card.”

The maid piped up in a shrill, tense voice: “Is that why I saw him wiping his fingerprints off that gun?”

“I wasn’t wiping anything off!” Conway snapped. “A dame found the stiff on her bed and went to get the manager—”

The house dick laughed. “She had to go all the way downstairs to get him. Couldn’t have used the telephone, eh?”

Conway frowned. Had the girl

played him for a sucker? Perhaps the whole incident had been carefully planned in order to thrust suspicion on him. Was it probable that the girl would have entered her room at the exact moment he entered his?

“I tell you there *was* a dame here,” he insisted. “Just wait awhile. She’ll be back.”

The detective turned to the group in the doorway. “D’any of you see a dame come out of here?”

The maid and the aristocratic looking woman shook their heads. The bald-headed man edged forward, stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“I didn’t exactly see her,” he said, “but I live in the room next door, and I heard two men and a woman talking in here a while ago.”

“How long ago?” snapped the detective.

“Oh, about ten or fifteen minutes. I can’t be exact.”

The detective glanced at Conway with a little grin of triumph.

“That’s all—for now. I’ll want to see you all later.” He herded the group out the door, returned to Conway with the revolver still tense in his hand. While Conway puffed on his cigarette, he phoned the police, then sat down by the door to watch his prisoner with unblinking eyes.

Conway finished his third cigarette, and still no blonde appeared. He glanced casually around the room. The door to the hallway was half open, and no one was in sight. He remembered that a fire escape was at the end of the hallway.

“Mind if I phone my editor?” he finally asked.

For a moment the detective acted as if he hadn’t heard the question. Then he drawled, “I guess so.” He leaned forward in his chair, reached toward the dresser to hand the French phone to his captive.

“THIS is darn nice of you,” Conway said, smiling—and then he acted. He brought the mouthpiece of the phone down hard on the man’s

right wrist. The gun clattered to the floor. Conway swung—but before the blow landed, a sledge-hammer fist twisted his own head back. He felt the skin on his lip split and he spit blood.

The big detective came at him again, cursing, his face contorted. But Conway darted in with rapid left and right. The detective staggered backward, upset a chair. His head met the wall with a sickening thud. Breath hissed out of him as he sank to the floor, and a little moan came from his lips.

Conway wiped the blood from his mouth and peered into the hall. No one there. Puffing, he glanced back into the room. His ex-captor's head was swaying slightly; his lips were moving noiselessly.

Then Conway was in the hallway and on the fire escape. His tall, lean body resembled that of a jumping jack as he made his way down the three flights of steps. The cool night air felt good on his hot face and he breathed deeply. He landed in a black alley, lined on both sides with cans of rubbish. The whine of a police siren sounded in the distance so he quickly stepped out onto the street and started away from the hotel.

Several blocks east of the hotel, Sam Conway paused. He now could do either of two things. First, he could start combing the city of ten million inhabitants for a blonde with beautiful brown eyes. Second, he could try to discover who the murdered man was and why he was rigged up as Santa Claus. And whatever he did, he had to do it soon—before every cop in the city was on his trail.

Why would a guy put on a Santa Claus outfit in summer? He tried to recall the picture of the body on the bed. The face had been a hard, almost bitter one despite its covering of powder and grease paint. Grease paint—that would mean a theater, perhaps.

Conway's own coupé was parked directly across from the hotel, so he

got a taxi and made the rounds of all the night clubs, musical comedies and vaudeville shows. He didn't have time to go into any of the places. Fingers crossed at every stop, he darted out of the taxi and looked at the ads in front.

And after an unsuccessful half hour he found it—he hoped. It was a musical comedy act called *You're My Holiday*. The photograph illustrating the act showed a brunette in a red, white and blue bathing suit surrounded by personifications of holidays—a guy dressed as a Puritan and carrying a dead turkey, a kid in red tights who held a bow and arrow, a fellow whose body was in the shape of a huge firecracker—and a *Santa Claus*.

Conway went around to the stage entrance, softened the aging doorman's heart with a fiver.

"Say, I've got to see Mr.—" He frowned purposely. "Ah, you know, the guy who plays Santa Claus."

The doorman's wrinkled face lit up. "Oh, you mean Dan Harris. Let's see, his dressin' room's right over there. Show begins in a few minutes, so if anyone asks you how you got in—"

SMILING his thanks, Conway hurried to the room. He knocked twice. No answer. He tried the knob, and the door swung easily open. The room was in darkness.

He groped for a light switch, cursed softly as he tripped over something soft on the floor. He found the switch, closed the door behind him. And then a chill of horror swept over him.

The thing he had stepped on was the hand of a man—a man dressed in a Santa Claus suit. A crimson stream trickled from a pencil-hole in his forehead. Conway stood motionless, conscious of the churning in his stomach.

What could he do now? If discovered here, the blame for this murder too would be thrust upon him. He touched the hand of the dead man. It was still warm. That meant that, for

the second time that night, he had missed the killer only by seconds.

But why in hell did everyone dressed as Santa Claus get knocked off? Was it all the work of some mad misanthrope who wanted to get rid of all Santa Clauses? If so, Conway pitied all the department store Santas who'd spring into existence about December first. No, he told himself, there must be a more logical explanation.

Suddenly, as he raised his head, Conway noticed a slight movement in the corner of the mirror of the dressing table. He spun toward the closed door, saw the butt of an automatic streaking toward his head. Behind the automatic was a broad, scarred chin, savage eyes and a shiny, bald head.

Conway jerked to the left, tried to dodge the blow. But the man was tall—nearly as tall as Conway—and powerful. The gun found its mark. The blow sent the reporter crashing backward into the dressing table. Lights exploded inside his head; fingers of pain stabbed into his brain. Then came darkness—and painless oblivion. . . .

Sam Conway awoke to hear what he first thought was the throbbing in his head. Then he realized that the sound came from someone's hammering on the door of the dressing room. He opened his eyes slowly, discovered that he was lying beside the body of the dead actor. And in his right hand was the automatic that had doubtlessly killed the actor.

"Hey in there! Anybody in there?" The voice came from the other side of the door.

Instinctively Conway leaped to his feet, turned the key in the lock. He sighed in relief as, an instant later, someone violently tried the knob.

His head was clear now. He realized that the real killer had planted the gun in his hand and had made a clean getaway. Now, he thought with a grim smile, he had two persons to look for—the blonde with brown eyes and a

big man with a scarred chin and a bald head. Only now the police would probably be after him for two murders, not one.

The knocking on the door stopped. Suddenly something heavy crashed into it. They were trying to break it down.

Above the dressing table was a small ventilation window. It was open, and the wind had twisted the curtains into little rolls. Evidently the killer had escaped through it, so Conway followed his example. It was a tight squeeze, and Conway nearly upset the dressing table in his struggles, but at that particular moment he would have tried getting through the eye of a needle itself. Finally he made it, dropped catlike to the narrow alley.

BACK on the street, he returned to his taxi, had the driver proceed a block north and then dismissed him. He stood in the shadow of a corner building, lit a cigarette. Now he was right back where he started from—except that he had glimpsed the face of the killer. There was something vaguely familiar about that face—like the happenings of a half-forgotten dream. And yet Conway was sure he had never actually seen the face before.

Angrily he threw the cigarette to the sidewalk, and he realized he had to get a hold on himself. He bought a newspaper and tried to forget for a while the mess he was in. But he couldn't get interested in anything as meaningless as news. Everything he connected mentally with his own situation. When he read of the dead in Europe he thought of the two bodies he had left behind him.

There was only one story that gave him at least a slight amount of satisfaction. He read that two brothers, Jake and Johnnie Dorgan, had held up a jewelry store that afternoon. The job had been a big one, and the whole police force was supposed to be looking for the two crooks. That meant

that the police, to some extent, would neglect him.

Finally he started back toward the hotel. He took a chance and stopped at Tony's for a Scotch and soda. That was the cocktail bar a half a block from the hotel. No one was there except a couple of drunks, so he felt fairly safe. After his drink he phoned Monkey-Nose, his city ed.

"Sure it's a good story," old Monkey-Nose grated, "but don't expect the paper to get you outa your jam. If you want to kill Santa Claus for a story, that's great—but you have to take the rap." The phone clicked ominously, and so Conway celebrated his latest defeat with two more Scotch and sodas.

He left Tony's at one a.m. and again approached the hotel. A plainclothes man was standing in the entrance—which meant that he couldn't get to his car across the street. Conway darted into the dark alley, walked beneath the fire escape platform and jumped. He missed twice, but the third time he made it, drew himself slowly upward.

Then he went catlike up the steps to the second floor. The window opening into the hall was unlocked, and the hall was empty. He then crept down the stairs into the lobby. It was deserted. The night clerk was not at his desk, and the cop at the entrance was staring dreamily out into the street.

Turning the brim of his hat slightly downward, Conway walked up to the desk. Quickly he thumbed through the registration book for the name opposite Room 304—the blonde's room. The name was Miss Rita Baker.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed. Half a page above the girl's name was the name of Mr. Dan Harris. Harris—the murdered actor. The number of the room was 309—which put it down the hall from the blonde's. The case was becoming more and more like a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces were all there, but they wouldn't fit together.

The sound of a turning doorknob came from behind the desk, so Conway slammed the book shut and made for the stairs. He walked up to the third floor, cautiously peering around the corner before entering the third floor hallway. He breathed easier when he saw that no guard had been posted outside his room.

FIRST he went to Rita Baker's room, tried the door. It was locked. Then he walked down the hall to Dan Harris' room—and that too was locked.

As he turned away from the actor's room, a door opened at the other end of the hall. Conway's head whirled in a semicircle, and a second later the door swiftly closed. But in that breathless second Conway glimpsed a wide-eyed little man with a suitcase in his hand.

Conway's forehead wrinkled. The man was the fellow who'd been so anxious to throw suspicion on him in the blonde's room, the one who'd told of hearing the voices of two men and a woman. Conway doubted that the fellow had recognized him, for the door had started to close almost at the exact instant he turned toward it. If that was the case, what was the bald little man afraid of? And where was he going with a suitcase at two a. m.?

Conway went into his own room, closed the door behind him with deliberate loudness. Then, noiselessly, he opened it just enough so that he could see into the hallway through the crack. For five minutes he waited. At last the door across the hall opened and closed again, slowly this time. Conway heard light footsteps, but no one passed before his room. That could mean only one thing—that the bald little man was going down the fire escape!

Conway counted to ten, then left his room. He slipped out of the open hall window onto the fire escape where he huddled, unmoving, his back close to the hotel wall. It took a moment

for his eyes to accustom themselves to the darkness. Gradually he made out the figure of a man—a man carrying a suitcase—on the lower section of the escape. The footsteps on the metal steps were clearly audible. Then came the sharp, staccato sound of his jumping into the alley.

Silence followed. The man did not enter the street. Instead he set his suitcase down beside his feet, remained in the darkness. There was an air of tense expectancy about him. Conway knew that the fellow couldn't have seen or heard him, for he was gazing into the street, not behind him.

For ten minutes, seemingly an eternity, Sam Conway squatted on the escape. He was determined to discover what the little man was waiting for, and yet he was afraid to move. A whispering silence hung in the alley, and many of the escape's metal steps were loose and rattled under pressure.

The city was asleep now, and the few sounds that were created were strangely magnified—a car's shifting gears a block away, the distant bark of a dog, a coarse laugh that drifted up from the depths of the hotel.

An automobile went noisily by, and Conway took advantage of the clamor to descend a half-dozen steps. Thereafter when a car passed by he would cover a few more steps until at last he was at the bottom of the escape. A jump would land him in the alley.

Suddenly a sedan pulled up to the head of the alley, its engine purring heavily. The man with the suitcase emerged from the darkness, bounded into the front seat of the car.

CONWAY leaped from the escape and broke into a run. His footsteps were almost like gunshots in the stillness. At the head of the alley he nearly collided with a can of garbage, leaped out of its way with a curse.

When he reached the curb the car had already roared into the street. It made a U-turn, and as it swung

beneath the light of the street lamp Conway caught a glimpse of the driver's face—a hard, determined face, as white as the bald head above it. Like an explosion of light the scene in the theater dressing room flashed into Conway's brain—the picture of the hard, scarred face, the automatic streaking toward his head. The man with the suitcase had been waiting for the killer!

Conway turned toward the hotel entrance, saw the figure of the plainclothes man calmly lighting his pipe. But he couldn't ask his help, he told himself. The man would either recognize him or put him in a spot by his questions. There was one chance. An only chance.

Conway raced across the street to his own car. He had opened the door and was half in before he noticed—her. For an instant he froze.

"Well, I'll be—"

The blonde opened her eyes, yawned and slid erect. "Well—it's about time you came along. I've been waiting since—"

Conway's hands flew over the controls. Tires screeched as the coupé jerked into motion, roared after the larger car. For a moment Conway thought he'd lost the sedan. Then he saw its taillight curving to the right. A second later the coupé careened around the same corner.

"Say, Mister, you must be in a hurry!" The blonde's eyes were wide. She was erect as a stick now.

Conway nodded to the speeding sedan. "Sister, my neck—and maybe yours—depends on getting those guys."

The girl didn't answer, but her face hardened.

After a moment Conway said, "Maybe I shouldn't be curious, but what happened to you when you went after that manager? Do you realize your disappearing got me in a hell of a spot?"

Rita Baker's eyes widened apologetically. "I—I guess I was in sort of a fog. After all, a girl doesn't find

a murdered man in her bedroom every day. I couldn't find anybody downstairs, and I just couldn't make myself go back to that room—at least, not without a drink. So I went over to Tony's for a few minutes. When I came back they said you were the murderer and that you'd escaped. I found out that this was your car so I figured you'd come to it sooner or later."

Conway nodded. He felt strangely warm inside. Then he realized that the sedan was suddenly gaining speed.

"They've seen us," Rita murmured. The two cars raced through the nearly deserted streets. Always Conway remained in sight of the sedan but he couldn't catch up to it. They soon came to the city's suburbs.

A FLASH of light appeared at the side of the sedan, and almost simultaneously a bullet whined through the top of the coupé's windshield. Conway kept his foot clamped down on the accelerator as he dug for his gun—the automatic the killer in the theater had put in his hand. With the butt he smashed a hole in the center of the windshield. Wind howled into the car, nearly made him shut his eyes.

"Can you shoot?"

Rita Baker answered by taking the automatic. Her lip quivered as she aimed, squeezed the trigger. She missed completely, and at the same moment another bullet crashed into the metal top of the coupé. The girl aimed again at the sedan's gas tank.

The big car swerved, and brakes screeched madly. She had hit a tire.

Conway jammed on his own brakes and both cars skidded to a stop. He and the girl slid out of the coupé, took shelter on the sidewalk by the rear fender of the car.

The sedan stopped about fifty yards ahead of them. The two men left the car, the little one carrying the suitcase. The larger man sent a bullet crashing into the street lamp above them. Now they were in almost complete darkness.

Conway took the automatic from Rita's hand, inspected it hurriedly. "Two bullets left," he said. His narrowed eyes tried to pierce the semi-darkness. He saw that the little man had dropped the suitcase and was huddled against the radiator of the sedan. His companion was crouched behind the street lamp, parallel with the car's trunk.

Another bullet whined over Conway's head, and then he bobbed up to fire at the little man. The fellow screamed, grabbed his shoulder, his gun clattering to the pavement. Conway fired again at the big man—and the bullet ricocheted harmlessly off the lamp post. Automatically he fired a third time and the hammer fell upon an empty chamber. He smiled grimly at Rita.

A rough voice broke the sudden stillness: "All right, you two, come out with hands up!" Conway threw the useless automatic to the pavement. The killer met him in the center of the street, his fingers tense around an automatic, a faint grin on his thick lips.

"You help Johnnie in your car," the bald man commanded Conway. He turned to the girl. "And as for you, I think we'd better take you along with us. You're just what we need for protection."

Suddenly Conway's glance fell upon the suitcase. It was lying half in the gutter, and its top had broken open. In it jewels shone like tiny eyes in the night—glittering rings, necklaces, watches.

Realization came into Conway's face. "You just called the little guy Johnnie. Then you're Jake and Johnnie Dorgan who held up the jewelry store today." He laughed to himself. "I should have guessed that you two were brothers."

Jake Dorgan smiled as Conway helped Johnnie into the coupé. The smaller Dorgan was still conscious though breathing heavily.

"That's right, brother," Jake Dor-

gan said, "but I don't think you'll live long enough to do much about it." He grabbed Rita by the arm, pushed her toward the car. He raised his automatic at Conway.

Suddenly the blonde lurched backward, broke the man's grasp. She fell flat on the sidewalk. Conway leaped forward in a flying tackle. Dorgan staggered for an instant, cursed, unsteady from the girl's lurch. And then his automatic cracked twice. The second bullet crashed into Conway's left shoulder, spun him half around just as he collided with the larger man. The arm screamed with pain, and for a moment he saw a sea of red.

The impact of the collision sent both men sprawling in the street, but the gun slipped out of Dorgan's hand. Conway brought his fist back and hit the fellow hard—so hard he felt the skin split on his knuckles.

IT WAS all over. The big, bald man lay on his stomach, shaking his head and running a nervous hand over his bloody mouth.

Conway took Dorgan's automatic from Rita Baker and answered the question that was in her eyes: "It's not bad. Only a flesh wound."

A few minutes later a police car and ambulance sirened up to the curb. Conway recognized one of the men who sprang out of the police car as the detective who was posted before the hotel. He did some explaining while an interne, assisted by Rita, did first aid work on his and Johnnie Dorgan's wounds.

"Jake talked plenty before you came. It seems that Jake and Johnnie had paid time along with Dan Harris, the Santa Claus actor, in Folsom. All three had been part of the same mob in prohibition days, and Harris knew about some jobs that Jake and Johnnie hadn't paid time for." He stopped as a shiver of pain went through his arm.

"I get it," the detective said. "Harris was blackmailing the Dorgans. But after that jewelry job, those earlier jobs wouldn't make much difference.

What was the murder motive then—revenge?"

Conway nodded. "Partly. But the main reason was that Harris knew all the hideouts the gangs used to have. The Dorgans wouldn't have been safe with Harris still alive."

"But how about that second actor—"

"That was where the Dorgans made their mistake. They wanted to do away with Harris and make a getaway. But they weren't sure where Harris was, so they split up to save time. Johnnie went to the hotel and Jake to the theater. Harris had evidently been pretty scared, for he put on his Santa suit at the hotel, probably planning to get a taxi and make the theater just on time.

"Johnnie killed him at the hotel and planted him in Ri—Miss Baker's room in order to create confusion and gain time for a getaway. Jake, as we know, went to the theater where he mistook Harris' substitute for Harris. That was when I—er, encountered Jake." Conway grinningly rubbed the top of his head. "Then the two brothers met in the alley by the hotel—and I guess you know the rest."

With his wound taken care of and the detective satisfied, Conway turned to Rita, grinning.

"Do you realize it's almost morning?" he said. "Think you could stand a little breakfast "

The blonde glanced to the east where the prospective presence of the sun tinged the sky a pale pink. She smiled and said, "I think I could stand it very nicely."

Conway was silent for a moment. "They say Santa Claus always brings you presents," he mused. "Well, this one brought me a darn good story—even if I did get a slug in the shoulder." He concluded his words with a prodigious yawn.

Rita laughed. "You're lucky. All I'm getting is a free breakfast."

Conway gazed into those beautiful brown eyes. "Yeah—and a sleepy-looking guy to eat it with."

The Blackout Deaths



By Charles Larson

In the darkness of the blackout, an unknown murderer struck suddenly. And John Gabriel, chief air-raid warden in his sector, figured he had the clue that would trap the killer. But when light was restored, Gabriel saw that its beams pointed in another direction—to the path that would lead himself to the Death House door.

ELOISE stood on the top step, trying to pretend she wasn't frightened.

"Good-bye," I said. "Now if—"

"You look cute."

"What?"

"I said you looked cute." She rapped on the top of my white air-raid warden's helmet. "Like a knight or something. I'm proud of you."

I raised my head and stared into the blackness. Over the city the hoarse sound of the sirens began again and even the air seemed to crouch. "I don't feel like a knight," I said.

"How do you feel?"

"Scared as hell."

"Good. Heroes always feel scared."

She leaned forward and kissed me.

"Bye, hero."

From the sidewalk someone stage-whispered: "John—Mr. Gabriel—is that you? I hope."

I murmured another good-bye to Eloise, and turned into the darkness. At the bottom of the steps young Jim Gould, one of my assistant block wardens, was waiting. He was a well-built, blond, good-looking kid in his early twenties, with a too-rich father and a too-fat bank account of his own. Four years of college track, bowling, and swimming championships had given him a physique like superman's, but had slowed his heart to a draft-deferment.

I stopped in front of him. "It's me," I said.

He grinned. "I thought maybe I'd stumbled onto a scandal. Tall, dark

author sows oat. That sort of thing. Some damn funny things happen in blackouts."

"Not this time."

"You're lucky. You're married. I wish I had some girl as pretty as Eloise to kiss me good-bye like that." He laughed. "If I got married, dad'd have a stroke, and I'd have to go to work . . ."

"Yeah?" Nervously I tightened the strap of my helmet. "Where's Klavich?"

"On top of his house looking for fires."

"And Henry Link?"

"He was chasing somebody off the street when I came out. Same with Dave MacArthur."

Suddenly I felt good. I felt big and important and not too scared any more. Probably it was the sensation of being alone in the night that had got me. But now I could see Steve Klavich standing like a great gorilla on the roof of his house watching for fire bombs, and blond, bulbous-headed little Henry Link scurrying around the streets ordering people inside, and Davy MacArthur, Scotch as kilts, telling frightened women that nothing could happen in a block guarded by a MacArthur.

I was no longer alone. All my assistants were set. Everything . . .

Then, abruptly, I remembered.

Groaning, I said: "Wait. Miss Robbins. Jane Robbins. What about *her*? Somebody's got to be with her in case—"

"Klavich is right next door."

"That isn't enough." I slapped my thighs and sighed. "Dammit."

Jim Gould was silent for a moment. Then he murmured: "Sherman was right, wasn't he, Mr. Gabriel?"

I laughed. Bitterly. In Jane Robbins' case, Sherman couldn't have been righter. The old girl was sixty, crippled, unmarried, neurotic, and as pleasant as a zombie to be around. Half fact, half guesswork, her gossip had ruined a dozen lives. But if some-

one didn't sit with her while the blackout lasted . . .

"Well," I said. "Tell them I went bravely. With a smile." I grinned horribly and started up the street.

And behind me I could hear Jim laughing . . .

MISS ROBBINS lived alone in a squat cracker-box house set far back from the street. It was small and old-fashioned as the woman inside it, and filled with the same creaks and groanings.

The sirens had stopped by the time I stumbled onto the porch, and the sound of the bell was loud in the house when I rang.

There was no answer. I rang once more. Twice more. Nothing.

Slowly I turned, and moved off the porch, and made my way across a lawn wet with dew to the side of the house. The place next door was big and dark like its owner, Rumanian Steve Klavich, and I felt little looking up at it.

I cleared my throat. "Steve?" I said.

Moonlight shone on the empty roof. Klavich worked as an orderly in one of the big hospitals downtown and maybe he hadn't got away. Yet Jim had said—

I licked my lips and shouted: "Steve!"

Still there was no answer, and I turned back to Miss Robbins', hoping it was only my writer's imagination worrying me.

One window, a bedroom window, would be unlocked for the wardens in case of a bombing. If I went in and everything was all right, I would very probably be charged with breaking and entering . . .

Breaking and entering . . . breaking and entering . . .

The words caught in my mind like a broken record when I bent down to stare at the moist earth of a small garden under the window.

Imprinted in the earth were two shoe-prints. Plain. Malignant. Yet odd somehow.

I straightened slowly. Everything around me seemed sharper, more clearly defined. The night was twice as black as it had been, the smell of moist roses more beautiful.

Still slowly, and without trampling in the flower bed, I pushed the bedroom window up and then I was scrabbling like a finless seal through the window and into the bedroom.

Miss Robbins was sitting fully dressed in an easy chair across the room staring at me.

"Oh," I said. "Well . . ." Laughing, I lifted a hand to my helmet.

She didn't laugh back. She didn't speak, or move.

She was dead.

I knew she was dead even before I crept across the room and played the shaded beam of my warden's flash over her slumped old-woman's body . . . even before I touched her cold wrist in trying to find a pulse that wasn't there . . .

I felt sick, nauseated.

Still, I could see no marks. No blood. How had she died? If her heart had failed, she would unconsciously have thrashed to the floor. Apoplexy would have drawn her mouth, tightened her limbs.

I moved closer to her and my foot kicked something. A solid something that slid across the floor dryly, snake-like. When I shot the light toward it, I saw the rectangular form of a blue-covered book.

Heart thudding, I bent down, picked it up. "My Diary."

If I read it . . . In the back of my mind I could hear a popular comedian whispering: ". . . if I doo it . . ."

I smiled and slowly opened it.

There was no warning. Only the softest scraping of a shoe, and my helmet was tipped to one side. I turned, cursing, and the blow smashed onto my exposed temple. Bayonet-like pain caught in my head, twisted, sickened me. Then the floor was roaring toward me. Dimly I could smell dust from the carpet in my nostrils. I wanted to sneeze . . .

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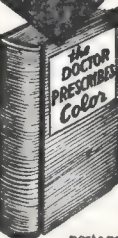
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"JOHN . . . John . . . John . . ." Over and over. Someone calling my name. "John!" Louder now. And hands were jerking at my shoulders.

It was hard. A long climb. But I made it. I opened my eyes.

"Johnny?"

"Hi," I murmured.

Eloise leaned down and kissed me. I was on my back, and Eloise was kneeling beside me, crying.

I said: "How—how did you happen to . . ."

Something was under my back, driving me nuts. I rolled over, groaning, got to my knees, and the spots spurted across my eyes again. But they passed. I ran my hand over the floor, found the diary I'd dropped, and my flash. If he'd been after the diary, he hadn't had time to get it.

"Are you all right? You were so long. And it was dark. I . . . I thought I'd find you and keep you company. I went twice around the block, talking the wardens into letting me do so as the wife of their chief. But no you. Then Henry Link blustered out and told me I had to get inside. We had words. Anyway I got away from him, and when I passed by here I thought I heard noises, so . . ."

"Did you see the guy who slugged me?"

"No. When I knocked on the front door, the noises stopped. Then, when no one answered, I tried the door and it was unlocked, and I just came back here and found you, and—and—"

"Miss Robbins. Yeah." I got to my feet. "She's dead. I think she's been murdered. I don't know how or why." The world dipped again, and I caught Eloise's arm. My throat felt as though someone had been playing soccer with it.

Eloise said: "You've got to get home! Do you—could you tell who—"

"Only that it was a man. I must have come along just after he'd done his stuff. Surprised him." I remembered the diary then and I waved it vaguely in front of Eloise. "The answer may be in this thing. Before he

jumped me I was reading some mighty interesting motives." I paused and looked at her shining eyes. "And do you get the great, astounding, glorious truth about this whole thing?" I asked.

"Truth?"

"Truth. It hit me when I first saw footprints outside the window. Only five people in the world could have done this. Only five people could have wandered around in a blackout without being questioned. Only five people knew Miss Robbins' bedroom window would be open, knew exactly where she'd be, knew exactly the layout of the house . . . Do you see?"

"You and your assistants," Eloise whispered.

"Yes," I picked up my helmet. "Me and my assistants. Let's go home."

At home I called the sub-control and told them to send the police out when the blackout was over. Then I studied the diary.

It was interesting. In black ink the soul of a frustrated, half-mad old woman stared at me.

Most of the entries were commonplace, but some . . .

For instance, under February 3, 1942:

Saw Henry Link today. With the same blonde he's been chasing all year. Mrs. L. doesn't know. My duty to tell her.

And under March 18, 1942:

James Gould gambles. Caught him coming out of Embassy Club. Too rich, that young man. Drinks. Also look Van C. H.

Eloise said: "Who's Van C. H.?" We were sitting on the sofa, reading the diary by the light of my flash.

"God only knows," I answered. "Maybe some kid he goes with. A bad example and all that hog-wash."

I turned a page. It was headed March 19, 1942:

I knew there was something wrong about that David MacArthur!!!

Traced state prison records at Salem, found incarcerated 1935-1938 for manslaughter. Must tell. Dangerous to live in same block with former criminal. My sacred duty to tell . . .

Eloise shivered. "That horrible old woman . . . No wonder she was . . ."

"Umm." I fumbled through the rest of the diary, found nothing more of importance.

OUTSIDE the sirens began wailing again. Long, feminine moans. The blackout was over and nothing had happened. Nothing except . . .

"Johnny," Eloise said. "There was—there was nothing else in the diary?"

And that was that. I'd hoped she'd miss it, but she hadn't. I murmured: "You noticed too?"

"I noticed there was something about everyone who could have done it except—"

"Except me, and Steve Klavich."

"Yes."

I frowned down at my hands. "And you noticed that a page had been torn out?"

"No!"

I ruffled through the book to show her, and together we looked at the saw-toothed edge of a torn page. Someone had taken the entry for March 20th.

Eloise sighed. "Golly," she murmured. "If it was something Steve had been trying to live down—"

"And you don't suspect me?"

She stared. "You!"

I replied haughtily: "I assumed it was wifely confidence, not—"

"Blah."

Far away the wail of a siren commenced again, and I said, "Police," gratefully. "One siren. I called them. Remember?"

"I remember. We'd better go?"

"Yes."

Eloise got her coat and took the diary, and in a moment we were outside, walking through the chill dawn to Miss Robbins'.



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MEN WHO THEN
GOT THESE
BIG JOBS**

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Up the street, a dark squad car was parked in front of the squat, cracker-box house, and uniformed police were everywhere.

"You know—" Eloise began.

But just then someone called, "Gabriel!" and she didn't finish. Hard footsteps pounded up the street behind us, and when we turned, Davy MacArthur, Henry Link, and Jim Gould came up.

Henry Link was angry. His puffy little eyes glittered at me from under the rim of his helmet. "Gabe," he said, "if all this commotion is some cheap writer's trick of yours—"

"I wouldn't joke about murder, Henry."

"Murder!" Dave MacArthur said.

"Murder. Yes. Jane Robbins."

"But—but—but how! Who?" Jim Gould this time.

I shrugged.

Henry Link looked sick. "Holy cow," he said. "Murder. The wife will drive me nuts with questions."

"You know," Jim said thoughtfully, "maybe there's something to that women's intuition business after all. Muriel," he looked up, "that's the gal friend, said she felt something was wrong last night when we were bowling. She said—"

Eloise was excited. Woman's intuition was one of her favorite myths. "Certainly," she said. "I felt it too. I remember saying to John, I said, John—"

I closed my eyes.

"I did too," Eloise said.

"Now, darling—"

The policeman was a godsend. He was big and red-faced and sleepy-eyed. He stood in front of us like fate, and said: "Hold it. Are any of you people John Gabriel?"

I hadn't noticed him come up and I hesitated before I answered. That counted against me. "I'm Gabriel," I said at last.

"You found her?"

"Yes."

"Lieutenant Coffee of Homicide

would like to have a little talk with you."

He said it pleasantly enough, and yet I had the feeling I'd just been convicted. I felt guilty as hell.

Silently we walked up the street.

Lieutenant Bill Coffee was small, gray-haired, melodramatic. He sat on Miss Robbins' bed, rubbing his eyes, while the policeman told him who I was, and then he said: "Let's have it."

I TOLD him everything I knew, except about the guy who'd jumped me. Heaven only knows why I left that out. But I did. It might have been because he'd been big and Steve Klavich was big. Then I looked across the room at Eloise, at the diary in her hand, and I said:

"There's something I should show you—"

The next he said so low I barely got it. But the import of it knocked me between the eyes like a sledge.

He murmured: "You got a lawyer?"

I frowned: "Lawyer?"

"Son, if you had a record, you'd be booked already."

The world swayed, caught itself. I'd been feeling so sorry for Steve, I hadn't had time to see the mess I was in. A mess that was to keep getting deeper and slimier . . .

I said: "Now wait a minute! I couldn't have killed her! I never carry weapons or—"

"You got hands?"

"Yes, but—I wouldn't strangle—"

"She wasn't strangled. The blood to her head was cut off by pressure on the carotid arteries."

Carotid arteries! In everyone's body there are twelve pressure points, twelve places at which severe bleeding may be checked. Slight pressure is enough; continued, forceful pressure will cause gangrene in a limb, or, in the case of the carotid pressure point which controls flow of blood to the head and brain, death of the patient. Perfect crime. No murder weapon. No fingerprints.

Lieutenant Coffee said: "You're an

air-raid warden. You had to take a first aid course. The average layman would know nothing about pressure points, but you—”

“My stars,” I said, “there must be thousands of people who’ve taken first aid.”

He went on quietly. “It was your job to know everything about the people in your block. Their habits, their physical condition, the floor plans of their houses. Only you could have reassured the victim when you went to her. It was your job to be there. She suspected nothing, had no time to cry out.” He glanced up at me. “What do you do for a living?”

“I—I’m a writer. But—”

“And you write detective stories? Murder mysteries?”

“Yes.”

“In other words, you make a living thinking up perfect crimes?”

“Yes, but good Lord . . .” I was sweating, trembling inside.

“You hated Miss Robbins,” he continued, “Tonight you entered her house through the bedroom window so that no one would notice you, unlocked the front door for an easier getaway—”

“No! No!”

“You didn’t go through the window?”

“Yes. I did. But not—”

“You deny hating the deceased?”

“I disliked her.”

“Then . . .”

“Leave him alone!” Like a small bolt of lightning, Eloise had hurled herself across the room to stand in front of Coffee. Her green eyes were blazing and her whole body quivered.

The lieutenant looked at me wearily. “Who in hell is this?”

“My wife. Eloise,” I said.

“You bet I’m his wife Eloise,” Eloise said. She gestured violently with the diary and I groaned. If he looked through it, found the torn page . . .

“What about the footprints?” she was asking. “Are they his footprints?”



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I'd almost forgotten about them, the one sane bit of business in this whole mess. But I didn't see that they could help me.

However, the lieutenant looked suddenly uncomfortable.

I took the hint and said: "You're damn right, what about the footprints?"

"The footprints add nothing to the case," Coffee said. And then he added wistfully: "Except confusion."

"You're trying to hide facts and things," Eloise shouted.

"I'm hiding nothing," Coffee shouted back. "But in this damned case things can't be normal, they have to be unique. And since you're so interested in those footprints, maybe you could tell me why one of them happened to be made by a leather-soled shoe, and the other by a rubber-soled shoe?"

ELOISE and I looked wide-eyed at each other, and we were thinking the same thing. We were thinking: Steve Klavich is a hospital orderly. Hospital orderlies must wear rubber-soled shoes. In the confusion of a blackout, a man might conceivably get one rubber-soled shoe and one leather on his feet. And to top it all, who would know more about the carotid artery than a hospital worker?

I liked Steve, but I liked my own life better, and so I turned excitedly to Coffee. "Listen—" I began.

Began. I got no further. Because at that moment the red-faced cop came in.

And he said: "Lieutenant—we got another one for you. Just found the guy next door—Klavich—on his roof. He's been murdered. The doc says somebody held his carotid arteries until he died."

I remember little things. The tick of an old-fashioned alarm clock somewhere in the room. The quick gasp of Eloise. The maddeningly slow way that Coffee turned his head toward me.

And I remember thinking: "I hope the trial's short."

What happened next was logically all wrong.

Young wives don't rush narrow-eyed and cursing at lieutenants of homicide. They don't kick the lieutenant's shins, and shout to their husbands to beat it.

But Eloise did.

It was so unexpected, and there was so much noise in a room that had been so quiet before that I did beat it. The red-faced cop was standing by the door, and I wanted to go out that door. So I hit him. In the stomach. As hard as I could. He bent over, grunting, and I hit him again where his ruddy neck swelled over his collar. He sprawled awkwardly at my feet, and I could hear Eloise yell:

"Kick him in the head!"

My wife. My little wife who likes children and puppies.

I turned in time for something to smash full into my face.

"You take the diary," Eloise cried, and eyes streaming, I bent down, picked it up.

By then Coffee had broken away. He had his gun out, and he was yelling with all the force of his cop lungs for me to stop.

Quickly I opened the door, shot into a hall. To my right was the bathroom. I galloped inside, turned the door's lock and stood trembling, wondering how in the hell all this had happened to me.

In the hall the noises were becoming ominous. Someone was banging against the door. I whirled, ran to the small bathroom window.

A perfume bottle rolled daintily to the edge of the shelf under the window as I clambered up, and broke on the floor. Then I was throwing up the pane and kicking at the screen. At exactly the moment I managed to squeeze outside, the bathroom door collapsed.

Except in nightmares, I have never run so slowly. My feet seemed to stick to the ground as though it were mo-

lasses. Behind me the lieutenant's gun barked, and invisible fingers plucked at my pant's leg. Heaven only knows how I managed to make the protection of Klavich's place without falling, but I did, and then I was scurrying around it, out of sight.

In front of me, the opening to a basement yawned like a great mouth laughing, and I dived into it. I didn't close the door. In the dark I caught my head a honey of a wallop on a low hanging water pipe, but I was safe for a few seconds.

WHILE I blew cobwebs out of my face, and pressed my upper lip so I wouldn't sneeze, I watched blue-trousered legs race across the yard and beyond the house.

Inside I relaxed.

And that, I thought dully, most certainly is that.

I looked down at the diary in my hand. If Steve hadn't torn the page out . . .

Groaning, I leaned against a dust-covered fruit closet, and tried to think. Far away someone shouted, and a rat groped blindly inside the cupboard.

Now suppose . . .

Softly someone whispered: "Johnny?"

It was Eloise. I could see her peering in at the door. I wasn't even surprised. I'd somehow come to expect that she would know where I was at all times.

"Nobody here," I said. "Go away."

She sighed, looked quickly about her, and came in. "Where are you?"

I reached out, touched her.

"Oh," she said. She sounded breathless. "I know you'd be here. You're too lazy to run far." Then, before I could mutter something indignant, she murmured: "Steve didn't do it. What now?"

I laughed nastily. "Now? Now, my sweet, we wait for Coffee to find me. Which shouldn't be hard since you've blazed the trail so beautifully."

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She ignored me. "You haven't any leads? No ideas at all?"

"I only know that we were wrong about that torn page, that Steve was as blameless as a new-born babe, that either there was nothing on the missing page, or that it contained a second motive for one of the dear suspects."

"But who? And *what* motives?"

I hit her gently on the chin. "That, my pet, seems to be one of the great mysteries. If I were writing a story with a plot like this one, Heaven forbid, I know whom I'd choose for my murderer. But as I am not—"

"Who?" Eloise asked.

"Henry Link."

"But — but that's silly. Henry couldn't."

"I know. That's why I'd choose him. If anyone on the face of this earth couldn't have committed that crime, it was Henry. Henry is cowardly, easily frightened. Henry would never have gotten one rubber-soled shoe, and one leather-soled shoe onto his sensitive feet. Henry wouldn't have jumped me in the dark. He'd have run. . . ."

I'd been talking slower and slower and now I stopped altogether. "Wouldn't he?" I said.

"I couldn't say. You're spinning this little fable."

"Shush." I was thinking, and certain things were falling into place with almost audible clicks in my mind. Shoes, for one. Didn't it seem incredible that a man, even one waking from a sound sleep with sirens screaming in his ears, would get a mis-mated pair of shoes on his feet? On the other hand. . .

I stopped, not breathing, eyes wide. I had it.

But motive! Where was the motive? The one in the diary surely wasn't strong enough.

I cursed, brought my fist to my forehead, and closed my eyes tight, trying to think. Something someone had said. . . Something. . .

I raised my head.

"What is it?" Eloise asked.

"Darling, it's only a hunch," I said, "but can you do something for me? Can you get to a phone, and can you call—"

Eloise was first to notice the shadow that fell across the doorway. She cleared her throat, and murmured: "Oh, oh."

I expelled my breath. Coffee had followed her. Fine. Great. Peachy. "O.K.," I said. I dropped my hands to my sides. "So you've found us. Come on in, the dust is fine."

"I have no doubt."

It wasn't Coffee's voice.

In the cupboard the rat started again, clawing its way along the bottom shelf, and the drip of water somewhere in the back of the basement softly intruded itself on my mind.

Eloise recognized the voice, too, and she whistled with relief. "Oh, golly," she said, "you scared the life out of us. We thought you were the police."

I said: "Be still, darling."

"Be still? Be still! What do you mean be still?"

The shadow in the doorway moved into the basement, and morning sunlight glinted on the gun in his hand.

FEAR lay like a great white-hot poker in the pit of my stomach. Fear for myself, of course, but something more than fear for Eloise. Unconsciously I moved a little in front of her.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked. "Get off my feet."

I said, "Now wait a minute," to the shadow with the gun.

"I've waited too long," he said. "I should have killed you when I caught you in Miss Robbins'—"

"Killed!" Eloise gasped.

"What was the number you were going to have your wife call, Gabriel?" Jim Gould asked.

I replied quietly: "The Vancouver City Hall. Or was my hunch wrong? Does 'Look Van C. H.' mean something else?"

He didn't answer.

I went on: "That was your motive, wasn't it? You're married. To—Muriel? Was that her name? Yes, Muriel. And Miss Robbins found out. And she would have told your dad. That's what was written on the entry for March 20th, wasn't it?"

"Go ahead."

"You told me once that if you got married, your father would have cut you off without a cent. A beautiful motive."

Little by little I was moving backward, into the gloom of Klavich's basement.

"The footprints outside the window gave you away," I said. "It was puzzling at first, but a little rational thinking brought out the answer. I couldn't figure how a man, even in a blackout, could get shoes that weren't mated onto his feet. They wouldn't feel right. But suppose they *weren't* mismated?"

I paused. "You'd been bowling, Jim, the evening before. You told us that, yourself. Bowling. You're a good bowler. A careful one. You'd have correct equipment. And correct equipment includes special shoes. One with a leather soul to help you slide. One with a rubber sole to stop you from sliding too far. You'd dropped them by the bed when you went to sleep, and so they were the ones you put on when the blackout started. Right?" He nodded.

"And Klavich?" I continued. "He saw you going in the window?"

"He saw me. Yes. I had to kill him." He was speaking swiftly, chop-pily. I could see his finger whitening on the trigger of his gun. "After-wards," he said, "I was nervous, upset. I didn't want to go back to Miss Robbins. But I had to. I'd only taken the one page from the diary and I had to have all of it."

"Listen," I said, "what'll it get you if you kill me?"

He laughed. "All ready those dumb cops suspect you. And when you ran out on 'em, that clinched it. A suicide

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pact between the guilty man and his wife would. . ."

Now, I thought. Now!

I threw the diary at his face, lunged into him. We crashed into a stack of mason jars.

"John!" Eloise screamed, and I rolled just as he pulled the trigger of his gun. Stinging powder whipped the collar of my shirt. I lashed my bleeding hand upward in a short arc.

From somewhere below his ankles Jim shot an uppercut that blasted me high on the temple and the whole world danced. I could feel blood ooze down the side of my face. I stumbled backward, caught myself in a squatting position.

I rose, jumped on top of him.

Just as heaven and earth exploded in my head, I heard Eloise say, far away: "Oops."

"John? John." Over and over. Someone calling my name.

Eloise leaned down and kissed me. She was kneeling beside me, crying. "I missed," she wailed.

Around me blue-trousered legs moved, and I could see them leading Jim, white-faced and still gasping for breath, out of the basement.

In a moment Coffee came over to me, kneeled down. "Hello, you damned idiot," he said. "You certainly make a crummy looking hero."

I lifted myself up, leaned on my elbows, and gazed malevolently into his face. "You know what?" I asked.

"What?"

"I'm going to write this whole damned thing into a story, and I'm going to paint you as one of the most twisted characters. . ."

He laughed. "You can't hurt me that way, Gabriel. There's only one way you could get my goat, and that's by spelling my name wrong."

"How do you spell it?" I asked.

He spoke slowly and distinctly. "C-O-F-F-E-Y. Coffey."

I smiled and leaned slowly back "I'll remember," I said. "I'll sure as hell remember that, lieutenant. . ."

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